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A MAGDALEN'S HUSBAND

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A MAGDALEN'S HUSBAND ;

BY

VINCENT BROWN

*They know not at what
they stumble"*



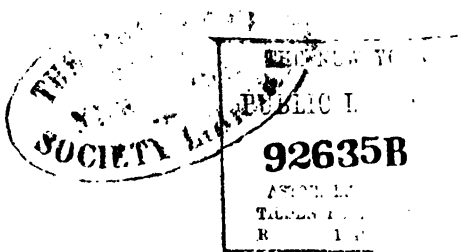
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A MAGDALEN'S HUSBAND

CHAPTER I

IT was the hour of nature's ecstasy, when the stars appear ; and Zeekel Draicot, walking home to Harpsfield from Little Colete, met on the road a wise old woman who said to him : " Are you looking for Joan Potten ? "

" No," he answered.

" But you've seen her ? "

" Only in the distance. Mr Tankervil gave her a lift in his trap."

" You never forget, Zeekel, that Joan is a wedded woman now."

" Good-night to you, Mrs Dungle."

" Huh-h! I wish your poor mother was alive."

" So I wish Joan's hadn't died when she was a child."

" But she was a grown woman of nineteen when her father wrote that about her in the family Bible."

" Ay . . . I'll not keep you, Mrs Dungle."

Worse than dead—so had Joan's father written in the book opposite her name. But no eye had seen it till long after.

The evening grew cloudy, and Zeekel had darkness for the end of his homeward walk. He met no one else on the road ; Joan was the companion of his soul. There is a love that gives all ; and sometimes it exacts all, but not from the being loved. Nor would Zeekel's thoughts have put Joan to shame ; she would have

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walked with him in the night in the presence of heavenly witnesses. It was not always so with Draicot ; this finer mood had fallen upon him to-night as he watched the stars come out. He had the passions of a strong man, and the celibate life had turned his heart into a consuming fire.

Near to Harpsfield, on the west, where the fertile lands fell in gentle slopes to Squire Burward's park, was Parum wood, through which Zeekel passed on his way home. It was not his most direct course (the village lying northward, higher among the hills), but the companionship of trees attracted him. He liked to hear the night wind in them ; it soothed his spirit as with the voice of impersonal sympathy. The wood was of beech and fir, naked for the most part at this season, but the thrill of spring was upon it, and Zeekel moved amid bursting life. He was conscious of the power rather than of the beauty or the tenderness of nature.

In a pitch black part of the wood, having heard a laugh which he recognised, he stood to listen, not being sure of the direction whence it came. "That foolish young woman," he said to himself. He kept quiet till the laugh was repeated, and then went on.

He was in a crowded path, saplings all about him, when a female figure tried to rush past. He caught hold of her, and she cried : "O my gracious here's another of them !"

"It's you, Sally Catmer. Who's with you ?"

"Zeekel Draicot is !"

"But the other one."

"Nobody."

"Now, Sally!" He took her arm. "Come on home; I'll keep my eye on you, seein' you're that senseless to trust yourself out here at this hobgoblin hour."

They went on; Sally in smothered merriment. "I never knew he was in the wood till I came."

"We'll leave him to it," said Zeekel. "I heard your laugh."

Sally repeated it. "That was when he began with his nonsense."

"Meanin', I suppose, he wanted you to name the day."

"No—he's a married man."

Zeekel's hold on her tightened. "If I was you, Sally, I'd try to——"

"You're hurtin' my arm!" She nudged him. "If it was round my waist then I couldn't run away."

"I don't intend you shall."

"I do believe, Zeekel, you're frightened of girls!"

"I'm not of you, Sally, for one."

"And you not married neither! But you love somebody, Zeekel?"

"Ay, to be sure; sister Effie, and Nicholas——"

"I do like a man," said Sally admiringly, "that can lie bold as brass for a woman."

They left the wood, and entered the village by the road that passed the almshouse. All was quiet. The lights at the cottage windows humanised the darkness.

"I've a good mind," said Sally Catmer when they were come to her father's door, "to let out who it was I ran from in the wood. Only—you'd tell his wife."

"I'd not tell his wife. But I don't want to know. Good-night, Sally."

He moved away ; she ran after him and whispered, "It was Martin Potten !"

And now Zeekel Draicot considered whether he should take another turn in Parum wood before going home. He worked with Martin in the Squire's gardens every day ; but there was a grim relish in the prospect of a talk with him in the dark, under the trees, with no listener near.

Harfsfield had a big pond in its middle, and Zeekel strolled round it, close to the edge, glancing every now and then at the solitary swan, a blurr of dull white on the water near the tiny island. At the rectory a dog was barking ; the old church over there was like a heaped-up mass of shadows that would dissolve at dawn ; the rooks were keeping watch by their nests in the elms before the schools. The hour was yet early, not nine o'clock.

The village was cut by four roads to the pond, but only one of the roads had a name, Dripping-pan lane, at the westerly end of which was the tavern, on the high road. A long stone wall, protecting gardens and a meadow, ran down one side of Dripping-pan lane, and on the other side were cottages, in irregular squares, huge trees rising behind them. There were two squares, five small dwellings in each ; and Zeekel, going down the first from the pond, stopped at the door of the left-hand corner house. This was where Martin Potten and his wife lived. Zeekel gave a formal knock, and entered.

Joan was seated at the table in the living-room

reading by lamplight. A wood fire sent out a pleasant smell ; there seemed to be a subtle fragrance, too, from the sheer cleanness of the little room. On the dresser stood the glory of Martin's household gods, a case of stuffed creatures—a weasel, a sparrow-hawk, a black-eared owl, an adder of monstrous size. A noisy cheap clock was on the mantel-shelf ; the hearth was covered with a Jacob's coat rug ; across the tablecloth was a neat piece of patching, this being needed because of Martin's having in a drunken fury flung the cloth into the fire.

"Good evening, Joan."

"Good evening. Is it raining ? "

"Not yet ; but there's a wet feel in the air."

He knew she had asked the question to make excuse for his coming in. She kept her seat, but put her book on the table. The ceiling was so low that Zeekel's head almost touched it as he stood with his great broad shoulders to the window. The lamp, it seemed, absorbed his attention. His mind was wandering in Parum wood ; but not for a moment did he harbour the intention of repeating to Joan what Sally Catmer had said.

"So Martin's not home yet."

"Not yet, Zeekel."

"He'll be in soon now, I daresay."

When alone they were Joan and Zeekel to each other, as they had been in the years before the disaster ; but should Martin be present it was Mrs Potten and Mr Draicot. This was Joan's only duplicity towards her husband, and she did it for the sake of peace.

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"Won't you sit down?"

"Ay, for a minute, if you've time to be bothered with me." He noted the book on the table. "You've been readin'."

"Yes, the Rector brought it to me. It's a novel of fashionable life."

Zeekel opened the volume. "I see you've been in fine company."

Joan gave one of her rare laughs. "Oh, yes; countesses and duchesses, princes and dukes, and I've just got to an archbishop. The Rector says that he and Mrs Mewett greatly admire it; and I'm sure it was very kind of him to give me a chance of revelling in such high society."

"You've got to the middle, about."

"Yes; but when you came in I was looking at the last chapter to see how it ends."

"The same as Effie. She always reads the finish first, and if it's to her taste then she begins at the beginnin' with a good will."

"We women, you know," said Joan smiling, "don't like to be beguiled of our tears under false pretences."

"I've wondered," said Zeekel, "whether some read and ponder overmuch." A deep breath expanded his chest. "I donno if it brings on a sort of drowsiness for deeds."

She knew his gaze was upon her; knew what his words implied.

"They say the swan's mate has been killed by a fox," she remarked.

"Ay, in Mr Windeat's turnip field. He caught her asleep and tore her head off. Not much of a supper,

to get her head only ; but them foxes are that fond of destruction just for a bite."

"The lamp globe is cracked," said Joan ; "I'll have to get a new one."

They had begun to look out furtively at each other from the curtained windows of their lives, and this trivial talk was the refuge of the woman's fear, the man's mental limitation. The tragedy of the swan was not new to them. The last time Zeekel had been here with Joan she had turned abruptly from his probings of the future by telling him how the solitary bird had come to her door and she had fed it out of her hand.

"It's a chilly night ; shall I make you a cup of cocoa ?"

"No, I thank you, Joan ; Effie'll be leavin' out supper for me if she's gone to bed when I get home."

"Are you not—have you to go back to the gardens to see to the stoves ?"

"No, I'm not on that job this week. I had thoughts of takin' a stroll round, just to——" His dark-brown eyes had a staring inward look. A grave dignity was in this man's face ; the dignity of a proud and unselfish nature inarticulate under an ever-present sense of injustice inflicted on another. Zeekel carried all his age, thirty-two ; Joan was four years his junior. He was not accounted a handsome man in Harpsfield ; he shaved, but kept his moustache ; the girls made merry over his broken nose, though they might have restrained their mirth had they known the act of chivalry which the disfigurement

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commemorated. "But mebbe I'm keepin' you from your story-book."

"Oh, no ; my eyes were beginning to ache."

A year ago Joan would have added, "I must sit up till Martin comes," but it was only under necessity that she now spoke to Zeekel of her husband.

Pray do not imagine Mrs Potten as a woman passing fair. It is true that Zeekel deemed her very beautiful, but that was the idealisation of hopeless love, and no one agreed with him. Yet, having seen her once, one would remember this woman ; for she was not as other women are. The world's judgment, her own judgment, the Divine judgment—all that was in her face, all the unfathomable story of it. Her grey eyes might, as Zeekel fancied, be violet-tinted, but one hardly concerned oneself about their mere colour in the presence of their awful intelligence. They were not ordinarily sad eyes. When Mary Magdalen went to the Garden, knelt at the sepulchre, and said "Rabboni !" one does not think of her as falling thereafter upon a common melancholy. A soul is noble in proportion to its capacity for lofty calm and resignation after it has come out of the deeps. Most of the saints had to wipe mire from their eyes before they could lift them to the hills.

The pitiful women of Harpsfield said of Joan that hers was such a sweet smile considerin' what she'd gone through ; and some would have it that somehow she was a good woman. The men recalled her girlish prettiness, her bright-hearted laugh, her sudden proud looks if you should presume on her buoyancy of spirit. It never would have happened so to the

poor lass (they said) if Jim Anscomb had behaved toward her like a man ; and what a crazy thing it was, her to go away to London all at once, as though she was the first to have bad luck with her young man—but it was brave of her to come home again, after her father's death, and live among her old friends in that quiet, humble, repentant way.

It would, indeed, have gone hard with Joan had there been the faintest sign of brazenness in her manner when she returned to her native place ; in that case Martin Potten's brutality would have been no more than she deserved, for rural folk do not take kindly to the woman who errs and seeks to cloak her folly with pride. They were sorry for Joan because of her early misfortune, and her unhappy marriage. They would not have understood had she told them that after her return she had not dared to hope for a good man's love.

"I'll bid you good-night, then, Joan."

She went with him to the door.

"Rain," she said, holding out her hand. "You should go home at once, Zeekel ; you've plenty of exercise in the day-time at your work."

"Ay, so I have."

He stood a moment on the broken flagstones of the path, looking in at her. It was wonderful to him, very wonderful and terrible, to see her there—in that man's house.

"Good-night, Mrs Potten," he said, and went away, with a rapid step.

And he carried into the night the vision of her, the lamplight on her face, on her hair, her beautiful black

hair—and her smile, as much as to say : Don't make it too hard for me, Zeekel ; don't ever forget that I'm his wife ! . . .

He walked quickly down the lane. His hands were clenched ; his limbs shook as in sickness ; he raised his eyes, and it seemed to him that the black heavens must open to their rebellious appeal. " O God," he cried, " I donno if you've forgot to mend the sorrows of the helpless ! "

The rain had set in for the night, but Zeekel was heedless of it ; and there was some shelter when he got into Parum wood. He took the path in which Sally Catmer's thoughtless merriment had surprised him. His movements were slow and silent, but not stealthy. His senses were vividly alert : an abnormal largeness of impression was upon him, as though he could hear every drop of rain that fell.

He went on till he reached the park ; and again traversed the zigzag dark way through the saplings. He did not explicitly ask himself why he was here. Were Martin Potten to appear he would speak to him . . .

Zeekel was an hour in the wood, and saw no one. His supper of porridge and milk was on the hob when he got home.

CHAPTER II

IT was on this night that Roger Coo played his new concertina in the Coach and Horses.

"The man makes the music twist and twirl about his limbs," said William Yervel, "till you might almost see it with a spy-glass."

"Roger's skill," said the landlord, "which I've yet to hear its equal for downright floating melody this side Great Horsted."

"He does it like a man see-sawing a baby," said the landlord's wife.

"They look down on it for a instrument in London, so I'm told," said Andrew Catmer, "an' I must say our Sally kicks agen it when she's up to her ears in the wash-tub; but for my part it tickles me like needles an' pins."

"I like the concertina on a windy night when I'm in bed," said Nicholas Draicot, Zeekel's younger brother; "then it rouses in my head highwaymen and ladies screamin' for murder."

"My sonnie, keep your mind off the fair," advised old Yervel; "one in the family's enough for the trouble that's brewin'."

"Let the young man be in love if he wants," said Sally's father. "You can tell it's come to Nick there from the sprinklin' on his chin. What's the colour of your beard that is to be, Nick, lad?"

Nicholas blushed : his long, misshapen face would have been ugly had it not been so good-natured. " Sister Effie says I'll be a tawny-whiskered man, different from Zeekel as if we'd never been born brothers. Play 'The Last Rose' on your new concertina, Roger, and see if it sounds the same."

" He's tired," said the landlord's wife.

" I could play it if I was half asleep," said Roger.

" Truly I do believe he could," said Andrew Catmer, " if he was half drunk."

Roger lodged with the Catmers ; and Sally, being the female head of the house, called herself his landlady, and " made him behave." On a summer night, if Roger should come home late and find the door locked, he would make himself a bed among sacks in the potting-shed at the gardens, and think no ill of Sally. Joan often befriended him, and mended his clothes. He was playing when Martin Potten entered the tavern. Roger was Martin's willing slave ; and now, when a piece of mud, violently thrown, hit him in the face, he merely stopped, and smiled in his watery way.

" I wonder you'd do sich a thing, Martin," said Andrew Catmer.

" Shameful," said the landlord's wife, " and it a religious tune too !"

" If he'd done it to me——" began Nicholas Draicot, excited.

" To you ?" Martin shouted at him. " If you want your share——" He stooped and picked a bit of mud from his boot. " Here goes for you, then, Nick !" He threw ; it missed ; the company began to protest.

"I'll fight you if you like!" cried Nicholas, and was for pulling off his jacket, but Roger implored him to keep quiet, as Martin was only in one of his tempers.

The landlord blustered at Potten: "You're always insultin' my customers, and as I've told you before plain, I don't care if I never see the shape of your money again."

"Look how he treats his poor wife," said Yervel; and it was well for him he was old.

"That'll do! Leave my wife alone!" Martin thundered. "That's my business, and I'll not have her name dragged about in a common public-house!" He turned to go; and suddenly wheeled round. "Come on, Roger; I want you." He went out, and immediately Roger followed him.

"Like master and dog, the Lord help us," said Yervel.

"What puzzles me," said Andrew, "is him bein' silent while Zeekel Draicot makes that free with his wife."

"Zeekel's not free with her," Nicholas muttered, "and there's nothin' wrong to be silent about."

"That may be as may be," said Andrew. "I must say I respec' Mrs Potten."

"And Zeekel respects her as well," said Nicholas.

As Martin opened the door of his house, Roger Coö, seeing the lamp had been lowered, concluded that Mrs Potten had gone to bed, and was for creeping away, but Martin pulled him in, and shut the door with violence. He turned up the lamp, and bundled his guest to a seat by the fire. There was a brisk blaze, Joan having put on fresh fuel before retiring;

she had almost fallen asleep in her chair, waiting alone after Zeekel had left. Supper of bread and cheese was daintily laid out on the table, and under the knife was a note in pencil: "Your cocoa is in the oven, dear." Martin snatched up the bit of paper and crushed it in his hand as though it were a thing of immense resisting force.

"You never get married, Roger."

Potten stood by the table. "That Sally Catmer is a devil," he said under his breath. "Joan!" he called.

"I am here, Martin," she replied from the bedroom, the door of which was ajar.

"I want something better than bread and cheese. I'm wet through. Where's that pudding?"

"I put it away," Joan answered.

"Then I wish you'd come and warm it up!"

He waited awhile; then in a louder voice—"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes—I am getting up."

Roger Coö, in the silence that followed, sat staring vacantly at his hero. "Don't make her, Martin," he said; "I couldn't eat a morsel if she has to leave her bed for it."

But Martin paid no heed to this supplication: his gaze was fixed on the inner door.

"She doesn't light the candle."

"She'll not want us," Roger whispered, "to see in while she's dressing."

"Huh!—a lot she'd care for that!"

The bedroom door was at once pushed to from within.

"Oh, Martin, she's heard what you said!"

Joan came out. She nodded and smiled to Roger, who said to himself, "My, she looks prettier with her hair like that."

"I didn't know you intended to bring anyone home, Martin, or I should have stayed up."

"It's only me, Mrs Potten," Roger explained.

"You are quite welcome, Roger," she assured him, again smiling.

"Of course he is; I made him come!"

The marvel was that the seven evil spirits which had been cast out of Joan Hurt had not been driven back into her by Martin Potten. She said nothing; but quietly, yet with a trembling in her hands which Roger at least noticed, put a piece of suet pudding in a pot of water, and placed it on the fire. Then she took a can of syrup from the cupboard, and sat down by the table. Martin went into the scullery.

"Mrs Potten," Roger said, "I hope you don't think it was me that wanted to fetch you out of your warm bed?"

"Oh, no, Roger. Martin is wet, you know, and a hot supper will do him good. I didn't suppose he would be out in the rain."

"I can't think where he's been," said Roger. He lifted his concertina from the floor. "If you'd like me to cheer you up with a tune——"

"Yes, please, do."

"I forget your favourites."

"Anything, Roger."

"Then I'll give you 'Home, sweet——'" But on a sudden the poor musician changed his mind. "I've got 'The Farmer's Boy' at my finger-tips."

"No," said Joan; "please play 'Home, sweet home.'"

"I thought it might be too late for 'Sweet home,' Mrs Potten."

"Perhaps it is;" Joan seemed to be speaking to herself.

Roger began; but Martin strode angrily in from the scullery.

"That's enough, Roger! All the 'pleasures and palaces' have been left behind."

Joan rested her head on her hand, and her eyes closed; Roger, as he watched her, thought of a dead woman's face. But the next minute she had risen, and was making the fire brighter about the pot.

"It will soon be ready," she said, and sat again by the table.

"My goodness," said Roger, "you do have a white face with your long black hair, Mrs Potten."

"Shut up, you idiot," said Martin. "You needn't wait," he added to his wife; "I'll take it up myself."

Joan rose. "I've put the syrup on the table. Good-night, Roger." She went into the bedroom, shutting the door after her.

Potten sat gazing into the fire, his elbows on his knees, his black beard crumpled under his palms. The pudding was heated, but he had forgotten it.

"I can't make out why she ever married me!"

This his thought—the mystery of his life now. He began to cough; he had an inherited weakness of the chest, and work in the hothouses was beginning to tell upon him. He was not thirty, and still a good-looking man, but his strength was not what it had

been. He was getting round-shouldered, and walked with an ungainly, tired slouch, but in fits of passion there was a sense of monstrous nervous power about this man. Since boyhood his reputation had lacked sweetness among women. Harpsfield may not be set up as a model village morally; but there were cottages in which Martin Potten even after his marriage could not feel sure of a gentle welcome.

He took up the pudding and gave Roger a piece, ordering him to eat it. He ate his own share ravenously; then he drank the cocoa, offering Roger none.

"I've to thank *you* for not getting a glass of beer at the Coach and Horses! I could drink fire," said Potten, grinding his teeth. He dealt his chest a violent blow. "My wind-box is rotten," he muttered. He seized the poker and made the wood sparks fly out of the grate. He turned to Roger. "Was it she that asked you to play that rubbish when I was out at the back?"

"Oh, no, Martin; I said to her——"

"But she didn't stop you! I know what she did it for!" He made as though to kick the concertina: Roger snatched at it with a cry as of a mother rescuing her child from deadly peril. "Now let's have it—'Home, sweet home.'" The shivering musician began, but instantly Martin roared at him to stop. "Good God! I can't stand those 'pleasures and palaces!'"

"I've grow'd that shaky all at once," Roger pleaded.

"Well, it's time you cleared out, or Sally'll be shaking you up in another way." He screwed Roger's ear as they went to the door. "If ever I know

of you telling of anything you see or hear in my house——”

“Oh, Martin, I'd not do it.”

“Some of your bones would need mending if you did!”

It was now within a few minutes of midnight ; and Potten had to be in the gardens soon after sunrise. He took off his boots and put them inside the fender to dry. But he did not yet go to bed ; had there been another furnished bedroom in the house he would not have gone near Joan to-night. It occurred to him to lie down on the Jacob's coat hearth-rug and sleep there.

This man of vehement uncontrolled passions was seized at times with an intense unreasoning feeling against his wife. It was not solely hatred, nor jealousy, nor revenge ; but a more subtle feeling, so subtle that he could not have communicated it rationally to anyone : the only fairly lucid part of it to himself was that their neighbours and friends (if Martin could be said to have any friend except Roger Coo) did not see Joan as he saw her. And he got as far as the fringe of another subtlety—that he was being unjustly blamed and condemned for failing to understand his wife. His own way of regarding her was not, it seemed, anybody else's way. There was tenderness in his heart, but it ran a diluted stream, and he had not the humility to perceive that his depraved standard of womanhood was a fatal bar to his comprehension of Joan.

It would have given him a fierce, perverted satisfaction to find occasion of offence against her. And indeed in a restricted, grimly-humorous sense he was jealous of Draicot. He recognised a certain chivalry

in Zeekel's demeanour towards his wife, but he thought it weakness, and it provoked his contempt.

He was subject to periods of spasmodic sentimentality, and in such moods he lavished kindness on his old dog-ferret. He was a member of the church choir, and during the singing of some hymn of morbid religiosity there would be an emotional break in his voice, tears in his eyes ; but his remorse did not include his sins against women. Yet he would get in a towering rage by reflections on his own moral character, especially if they were made by Miss Treeves, their next door neighbour, and a thorn in Martin's side ; and he would denounce as a low blackguard the fellow who should use indelicate words in the presence of a child.

He walked up and down the room on his bare feet. How had the lamp got cracked ? The oil was nearly consumed. He turned up the wick until the globe was full of smoke, then flicked it in two with his finger and thumb. The breaking of the glass gave him a sinister pleasure ; but the minute after he was angry at having to turn the wick so low down that he could scarcely see across the room.

He got a lantern from the scullery, and lighted it, striking several matches and blowing them out before he used one. The lantern made an unpleasant smell, but Martin cared nothing for that. He knew his wife disliked the smell, and grew irritable again on noticing that the bedroom door was shut.

He took from the dresser the book the Rector had lent to Joan, and looked it over by the light of the lantern. Mr Mewett's name was written in it. "A

trashy novel," Martin said to himself; "she'd read a lot of this stuff in those 'pleasures and palaces' days!"

How many men had she known?—*that* was nothing now to Miss Treeves and all those gossips who heaped their scandal-mongering upon him! How many had she known?

And then he got back in vague reflection to the days before their marriage. That was Martin's great puzzle-land. He must have been a weak fool then, like some of the others: Zeekel, for instance. He recalled what the old Rector (now in his grave in the churchyard out yonder) had said to him: "It is a noble step to take, Potten, and I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest on you both." He had laughed to himself at the time; for it had never occurred to him that he was doing anything fine. He had simply married Joan Hurt because he wanted her, and because, after the change that had come upon her, marriage was the only way to get her. She had taken him, of course, not because she was anxious to be his wife in particular, but because she wanted to make herself respectable by being called a married woman—and his name did as well as another's.

He did her the justice to remember that she had not hunted for him; it was he who had gone after her, and he had asked her more than once before she consented. Yes: let her have her due so far. But he had been hoodwinked all the same! He had not bargained that she should be so different. There he got lost in the bewilderment of the change that had been wrought in Joan.

But he had no regrets on the score of having done her an injury. It was she who had betrayed him—somehow. She kept above him: looked down on him—did she not? It was in her eyes, her voice, her every movement. When, under his ill-treatment of her, she bowed her head in submission—that made him feel indefinitely base.

He would have been willing to meet her half-way, but there was no bringing her down from her throne. There was a sort of shining whiteness about her sometimes. As the months passed she seemed to be removed farther and farther from him. Sometimes he was wonderingly afraid of her, as a superstitious bad man may be of the Sacrament. Yet her gentleness and patience maddened him, raised the fiend in him. She was always forgiving him. He could understand that, though she never spoke of forgiveness.

He thrust his arm across the table, and rested his head on it. She was in the next room, yet seemed to be in another world. Everybody knew what she had been, but that was ages ago, and seemed to have happened in another world too.

It would bring them nearer to each other—bring her down from that white height of hers—if she would do something that needed *his* forgiveness.

Here was the secret of his mental struggle—the stir of conscience, faint yet indestructible, amid the dark forces of elemental evil in the man's heart. Such awe of himself, or of her, as he felt, was due to his absolute belief that his wife was now farther from wrong-doing than she had ever been since the

days of her childhood. He shuddered under the miracle of it.

He got up and stood looking at the inner door. Then he filled his pipe ; and, not at once finding the matches he lighted it with a page torn out of the Rector's book. He let the page burn out, watching the ash of it in his hand. Then he tore several pages across, and burned these also in the same way. He blew the ashes from his hand into the fireplace, and smoked on in apparent tranquillity for half an hour.

When the clock on the mantel-shelf struck one, he put his pipe in his pocket, and leaving the lantern on the table—the lamp was now out—went into the bedroom.

It was dark there, and he could not see his wife. He heard her breathing in bed, and said to himself, "She's shamming to be asleep." He said, "Joan," and she answered drowsily, "Yes, Martin," and moved, as if turning to him.

He stood still. The wind had risen, and was beating the rain on the window. Martin advanced, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"It's a wild night," he said, "and I forgot to cover up that frame of cuttings."

"Perhaps they won't take much harm," Joan said. "It doesn't seem to be a very cold wind." She added after a short pause : "Are you not coming to bed ?" He did not speak, and she touched him. "Do take off your coat, dear ; it's quite damp." He gave a forced laugh, but still made no reply. "Roger has gone, I suppose," Joan said.

"I bundled him out. I was wondering," Martin

said, "how much that word 'dear' means when a woman says it." He laughed again, triumphing in her silence. "Joan—did any man ever threaten to kill you?"

"No, Martin; no man ever threatened to kill me."

"Would you have been frightened?"

"Yes, I should have been afraid—at one time."

She could tell, from his manner of breathing, that his lips were set.

"At one time!" he repeated. "You're always on about that."

It was not true; unless when he compelled her to it, in a reluctant self-defence, she never referred to her life during her absence from Harpsfield.

"Roger plays very nicely," she said. "He has been saving up for some time to buy a new concertina."

"But you wouldn't be now," Martin said, sticking to his idea. "You'd not be frightened if anybody was to threaten you now?"

"I have you to protect me."

"I don't mean that. I want to know—would you—*now*?"

"Not in the same way," she replied.

"That's because you're good," he said.

"I am not good, Martin; I am only trying to do what is right."

"If you were bad again—would you be as bad—like you were before?" The wind and rain swished on the window-panes. "Would you?" he insisted.

Her answer came very softly, "I should be much worse."

"That's because you're different!" he cried in a searching voice, as though he wished to drag something else from her, against herself, for the appeasement of his own conscience.

"Martin, I am sleepy," she said, "and I'm sure you must be too. Do take off your wet clothes——"

"They've got dried on me."

"But it must be very late; I can tell by the sound of the wind."

"I don't know that I'll go to bed to-night," he said. "You'd not be sorry. You hate for me to be with you!"

"No, no, Martin! I'm sure I've never said anything like that to you."

He moved so that the bed creaked.

"What was that you said the other day, when you wondered whether you'd die before me? You made me promise to put some words on your grave." He paused, as if to give her a chance of repeating them; but she lay still. "'I believe in the forgiveness of sin'"—and Joan uttered a low moan. "You live in the thought of that!" Martin said; "and I don't! You know I don't—and can't—always!"

"I hope for pardon," said Joan. "Mary Magdalen was forgiven."

"Ha—I knew that was in your mind. So you think you're like *her*! But how do we know she stuck to the right way after Christ was in His grave?"

"Oh, yes, she did, Martin," Joan said earnestly.

"But how do you know?"

"Because she knew He was *not* in His grave."

"But would that keep her straight?"

"I don't think anything else would," said Joan simply. "Her fellow-mortals would not be much help to her, I'm afraid."

"That's meant for me!"

"Martin!—no, no——"

"I've stood by you, anyhow; I wouldn't hear any man or woman run you down."

"I am quite persuaded of that, dear, and I am grateful to you for it."

"Well, but supposing I was to take up with another woman. Supposing I went and lived with another woman—Sally Catmer, for instance—what would *you* do?—go and live with that white-livered cur, Zeekel Draicot?"

"No, I should not live with any other man."

"You've had enough of us, no doubt!"

He heard her sigh.

"Please don't joke about these matters, Martin."

"But if I were to do it?"

"Then I should go to the other woman and ask her to give you up."

"You—you'd do that?"

"Yes."

"But she'd cast the others up at you."

"I could not help that. I should be prepared for it, I think. I am your wife, and I should tell her so."

"Because you wanted me back, or—or only for her to give me up?"

"Both," said Joan.

On a sudden he leaned over her, got his arm under

her head, pressed his cheek to hers. "Joan!—O Joan, Joan!" He kissed her neck; lifted her from the bed in a passionate caress. "I can't make you out, Joan! You don't seem to belong to me!" She did not return his embrace; she had no kiss for him; her hands did not touch him save where one was between his side and hers in his strenuous clasp of her body. Her body!—that was all of her he possessed. "You're but a dead woman to me!" he cried, and as suddenly released her. And then she tried to take hold of him, but he would not let her. "You'll always be what you are now, Joan. There'll never be any difference as long's you live. You aren't frightened of me, and you don't love me," he said bitterly. "You can't, you can't!" She had raised herself, and her arms were round him, but he drew himself from her. "It's only because you think you have to— from being my wife. You despise me."

"No, no, Martin."

"You do as much as you can," he said; "you'd hate me and quarrel if it wasn't for what you've come to," he added, getting nearer to the spiritual significance of their tragedy. He stood off on to the floor. "The lamp's broke," he said. He went to the door. "I've lighted my lantern."

"I'll get another globe in the morning," Joan said.

"I broke it," he told her: it was upon him to make some confession. But the next moment, as if in revolt against his own compromise, "If we had children," he said, "there wouldn't be so much money to waste." He opened the door: then, with his back to her—

"I've torn a lot of pages out of the book you were reading."

"I'm sorry you've done that, Martin. But perhaps you didn't know the Rector had only lent it to me."

"I did know—that's why I did it! You can tell him for all I care."

"It may not be necessary to tell him," Joan said.

"You'll take the blame on yourself? Then that'll be a lie!"

Martin passed into the living room. He carried his lantern into the scullery, and removed a sack from a box that stood on a broken chair in a corner. The box had a lid on the top: this was secured by means of a large padlock, which Potten unlocked with a key taken from his waistcoat pocket; then, having set the lantern on the edge of the boiler, he raised the lid and looked in on a litter of clean straw. Nothing but straw was to be seen. "Hullo, old sleepy head, aren't you going to speak to me to-night?" Martin said; and speedily the white head of his huge dog-ferret appeared. He caught the brute by its neck, hauled it out, and held it to his breast with one hand, while with the other he thrust aside the straw and took out an empty saucer. "Do they starve you," he said, letting the creature crawl up under his beard. "Too rainy to get you a sparrow, old chap, but if there's milk in the house you shall have it."

Still holding the ferret to his chest—its eyes of sinister luminous pink, like liquid flame, showing through the coarse hair of his beard—he returned to the living room, half filled the saucer with milk, and added bread torn with his fingers out of the side of a

loaf. He then dropped the ferret into the box (pressing back the straw to get the saucer down in a corner), bade it good-night, and locked it up, replacing the sack to keep it warm. His face wore a kinder expression now. Potten would think nothing of getting out of bed on a savagely cold winter night to feed his ferret—growling abuse of himself for his inhumanity in forgetting it; and to leave home without attending to the animal meant a morning of evil temper. He was proud of telling how the ferret had got its back ripped open in a famous rat fight: it was really a meagre story, the battle royal having taken place in a burrow, but when Martin told it, to make Roger Coo's blood "crawl," he pretended he had been an eye-witness, and gave gruesome details.

Being now more pleased with himself, Joan's husband went to bed.

CHAPTER III

JOAN had soon an opportunity of apologising to the Rector for the injury to his book ; he understood at once, and told her not to mention it.

Mr Mewett formally visited his parishioners once a month. The parish was not very extensive, and he got comfortably over it in a day. In the morning he completed the village, on foot ; and after luncheon he made an official circuit, on horseback, of the outlying houses.

Mr Mewett had been a year and a half at Harpsfield, but he was still spoken of as the new parson. The old Rector had for nearly half a century been the father of his people ; he had baptised generations of them, and had given pretty Joan Hurt his silent blessing as she knelt at the altar rail on Easter morning for her first Communion ; and his memory was fresh, and sweet, and gracious in the village. Mr Mewett found himself confronted with stubborn prejudices, and he had not yet lived them down. He had been an officer in the army, and had astonished his friends and vexed his family—his wife in particular—by retiring and taking holy orders at a somewhat late period in life. There had not, so far as was known, been any nonsense about “ conversion ” ; for Mr Mewett had a manly horror of allowing anyone to get at close quarters with him in spiritual affairs.

He was a round little man with a red and blue face and a voice that always bawled. He seldom entered a cottage in the village, and when visiting on the outskirts of the parish he would only dismount in the event of a parishioner's being sick unto death. Then he would take a very small manual from his pocket, kneel down in the room (not too near the bedside), order such of the family as might be present to kneel also, read a couple of prayers in the tones of an officer on command, stand a minute or two looking in silence at the sick person, say in a voice meant to be considerate, "You want nourishing; I'll send you some port"; and then in his jerky fashion march out of the house. The wine would be promptly sent; the Rector was rich, and would have been generous, the villagers believed, but for his extravagant wife.

Joan recalled with quiet humour the Rector's first visit to her. He gave the door two thundering blows, in rapid succession, with his fist, and when she opened it in some alarm—"Ha, I'm your new parson," he bawled at her. "Do you come to church? Mind you come regularly! I fancy I've seen you there. Hope you're all quite well. Good morning!" and off he went without waiting for a word of reply, going through almost exactly the same formula at every door. As a preacher Mr Mewett excelled in denunciation of sinners, but the comprehensive sweep of his invective left his parishioners considerable room for personal complacency.

Prior to the coming of Mrs Mewett there had been at least two magnificently attired women in Harpsfield. Both were spinsters arrived at years of discre-

tion: that is to say, each declared her unalterable resolve never to marry. The one was sister Effie, the other Miss Treeves, Joan's staunchest friend. It was a precious thing to Joan to be loved by one woman for her own sake; and the friendship of Miss Treeves, for all her eccentricities, was worth having.

She was the village dressmaker, and maintained herself and her aged parents, her father being partially paralysed and unable to work. When the Commandment about honouring father and mother was read in church, old Mrs Treeves would say to herself, "Then our Janet should live to be a hundred." It was only to her parents that she was Janet; everyone else called her Miss Treeves—she insisted on this, even from Mrs Potten; she doubted, indeed, whether it was dignified for her mother to call her Janet before strangers.

Miss Treeves was "a great reader," and her reading had supplied her with a vocabulary which was a curious mixture of the pompous and the colloquial styles. She produced the former with Johnsonian effect for the undoing of rude persons; and the latter was not less effectively used for "the taking down of such trash" as Martin Potten and Sally Catmer. It was Martin whom Miss Treeves held responsible for the remarks of "ignorant impertinence" when a large card appeared in the Treeves' window bearing the legend: "Miss Treeves, Costumière."

If anyone should be about, Martin in passing would laugh insolently and jerk his thumb at the "Costumière," the boisterous accent in which came to be known as "Miss Treeves' tail"; on its first appearance boys and girls crept down the square from Dripping-

pan lane to have a peep at it; and Mr Mewett incurred the dressmaker's undying enmity by bawling at her one day, as he pointed to the card with his walking-stick, "This is England you know. Nobody understands French here!"

"Then I pity their ignorance!" Miss Treeves retorted; and presently it was noised abroad that she was never going to church again, even if she had to join the Dissenters at Thakeam.

She was a tall, angular woman, with a walk so masculine that she was known at the rectory as "that striding woman." She dressed in the height of the fashion of six months ago, and wore her hair in curls, which were tied tight (always with crimson ribbon) at the back of her head, and then spread out over her shoulders with child-like ostentation. She had a large, thoughtful, good-natured face; and Joan at least knew how kind her heart was.

Sister Effie, on the contrary, was not well-disposed towards Joan. On this bright March morning, for instance, as, resplendently clothed in black satin and much white lace, Effie waddled (there is no other word) along the lane to call on Miss Treeves: "If that Mrs Potten is there," she said to herself, "I'll not step an inch inside the door."

You could identify sister Effie a long way off. She was an enormous woman, and her clothes hung about her formless body like old-fashioned bed-curtains tucked up with cords. She made a brave display of white lace: it rolled over her back and chest like foaming waterfalls. The little girls of the village called her Old Antimacassary.

But this was a very serious business that had brought Effie Draicot forth in her Sunday raiment. Miss Treeves answered her knock.

"Is Mrs Potten in your house?" she inquired in her slow, self-important, obstinate way.

"No."

And without further parley Effie entered.

"It's about Zeekel and Mrs Potten," she explained when seated. "I've given him notice to leave my house."

"What for?" Peter Treeves called out from his arm-chair by the fire.

"It's Mrs Potten's doin'," said Effie.

"Zeekel's a good 'lad; don't you cast him adrift, Effie," said Peter, "or you'll rue the day."

"I'll not have it goin' on no longer with him in my house," said Effie. "Us Draicots have always been respectable, and Nicholas is but a boy."

"What's it all about?" Peter asked.

"Him and her," said Effie. "The talk of the village."

"Chatter about women ain't bound to be gospel," remarked Mr Treeves.

"I should think it isn't!" said Miss Treeves.

"Us Draicots," Effie solemnly repeated, "have always been respectable." She leisurely pulled herself together; there was no chair in Miss Treeves' house quite big enough for Effie. "It's true Zeekel's grandfather was hanged at the cross-roads for sheep-stealin', but my father always said he was innocent, and I thank God for it. There's no slur on us Draicots."

"And so you've turned your own brother from

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the four walls where he was born and lived," said Peter.

"I've not done it yet, but I've given him notice. I wrote it out and put it on his plate for breakfast this morning."

"What did he say?" Miss Treeves asked.

"Nothin'. He looked at me, and then tore it up before my face."

"Quite right too," said Peter Treeves; "proper-spirited thing to do."

"But what did he say?" Miss Treeves urged.

"I told you—nothin'," said Effie calmly. "The house came to me from my father's will and testament; and it's not a place for them that hanker after other men's wives. I've been packin' up his things, and he's welcome to the family Bible, likewise the coloured picture of the bad place, because father said he was to have them when he got married."

"Ah, you're a genuine Draicot, Effie, for fixture of brain-power when you're set to it."

"Brains!" said Miss Treeves scornfully. "But you'll never turn him out?"

"That I will," Effie affirmed without the slightest sign of emotion.

And now Miss Treeves began to flare up.

"It's utterly revolting to think of!" she cried.

"There's one thing might be done," said sister Effie, still placidly obstinate. "I can't do it myself, from the vow I've took to keep the family respectable." She directed her bovine gaze upon Miss Treeves. "If you'd make Mrs Potten promise on her solemn word never to speak to him again——"

"I?" said Miss Treeves.

"Or let him enter her door——"

"I?" screamed Miss Treeves. "What ignorant impertinence!"

"But you're her friend."

"Yes, I am, and I mean to be; and it would set you better, Miss Draicot, if you too befriended her, instead of acting in a ridiculous manner that can only stigmatise the character of a much-injured woman!"

"Nobly spoke," said Peter.

Then began Effie with an air of heavy propriety: "I can't forget what she's——"

But Miss Treeves' eloquence came out in an angry torrent.

"Good Lord, it's time we women *did* forget! Mrs Potten has suffered enough—and look what she has to endure from that brute of a husband! You'd be more merciful, Miss Draicot, if you lived next door to her as we do, and knew the devilishness of that man. He had been striking her last night when I went in; I *know* he had, though she was too proud to confess. And there he was before the fire with his filthy ferret in a basket! He ordered me out of the house!"

"There'll be murder in this village," sighed Effie, "before we see the end of it."

"Did I go? No," said Miss Treeves; "I stood up to him and dared him to lay a hand on me! 'You're a big coward,' I told him, 'a mass of hulking ignorance, or you'd not ill-treat a woman; and a fool into the bargain, or you'd have more sense than to drive your poor wife to desperation.'"

"But he did put you out, Janet," said her father

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it was a sore point with the old people that their daughter should persist in interfering next door.

"Yes—but not before I'd said all I wanted to say. And now I'm asked to insult Mrs Potten about Zeekel!"

"If she'll not," Effie began, "give him up——"

But Miss Treeves would not listen to her.

"What is there to give up? She doesn't want the man. Good heavens!—I can't help swearing," apologised the costumière; "hasn't she come to grief enough through men already? I'll not," cried Miss Treeves, standing like a prophetess, "give pain and humiliation to Mrs Potten to please you or anybody else; and if you turn out Zeekel because of your own nasty thoughts and imaginations, then I'll make up a bed for him in this house." She glared at the heap of satin and lace. "Oh, I will!"

Sister Effie thought it time to go.

"I'm not sure," she said as she let herself out, "but what I shan't have my new spring gown made at Thakeam."

"You can have it made at Jericho," cried Miss Treeves, "for all I care!"

CHAPTER IV

JOAN was getting dinner ready when Miss Treeves, an hour later, went in. There was a bluish mark on her brow, and Miss Treeves suspected, from her cautious movements, that she was lame.

"You've been using onions for dinner," said the dressmaker, sniffing.

"No," said Joan.

("Then she's been putting it on her forehead to keep down the swelling," Miss Treeves mentally decided.) She stood close to Joan. "You're quite a little woman compared with me. You look tired and worn," she added sympathetically.

"I'm not feeling very well to-day," Joan admitted. "I had rather a bad night."

"I heard him ramping," said Miss Treeves, coaxing for confidence; she honestly did not think it well that Mrs Potten should keep her husband's ill-doings so much to herself. "Did you quarrel with him?"

"No, we didn't altogether quarrel. He did something—passed a remark that annoyed me, and I spoke to him about his conduct more firmly than I have done hitherto."

"The man's an archangel of darkness!" said Miss Treeves.

But Joan diverted the conversation.

"You've had some customers this morning?"

"Only that old guy Effie Draicot."

It was when Joan seated herself that Miss Treeves cried out: "Oh, my dear, you're far too humble, and ever so much too proud!"

With a faint smile Joan asked how she could be both.

"Well, you are, and don't tell me! All this patience—all this silent endurance—pride and humility are at the bottom of it."

"What can I do?"

"Do as I should—*talk* about him; make an exposure of him!"

"But that wouldn't help me; and I don't think it would improve Martin."

"But it gives such an erroneous impression—you taking it all so quietly. Why, there are people who actually think he deserves praise for having married you!" Miss Treeves' sympathy was too sincere not to be full of indiscretions.

Joan showed no emotion; but that strange quietness deepened upon her. "It is not every man, you know, who would have made me his wife."

Miss Treeves' curls were in a great agitation. "I won't listen to the idea that you've ever been as bad as he is! You seem to take *that* for granted, and I don't, and won't!"

"But what help is there for me?" Joan asked.

"Father says I am a sound critic," said Miss Treeves; "but I can't set everything right. If I were the Rector, with the authority of God and the Church behind me, I'd find some method of release for you! Have you spoken to him?"

"No, no! I shall not do that."

Miss Treeves then told Joan she did not take enough outdoor exercise. "It might try your strength to keep up with me in my walks; but you injure your health by staying in, day after day." Joan made excuse that the weather had been rough. "But the days are lengthening, and getting nice and fine. Look out there how the blessed sun is shining on the snowdrops and crocuses; and it would wake you up to hear the magnificent row the rooks are making in the park. They talk as much sense as some men I know! Will you"—Miss Treeves felt half ashamed of this trick to force Joan to admit she had been lamed by her husband—"will you go out with me after dinner?"

"I feel," said Joan, "I should like to lie down on a sunny bank, in some far-away corner, where there were wood violets, and the blue sky above me, and the birds singing—yet a great calm, a great silence—and fall asleep there, and never open my eyes on the world again."

"Oh, my dear! do stand up," said Miss Treeves; "I want to hug you."

"Ah," said Joan, "poor Roger does not break *your* heart when he plays 'Home, sweet home.'"

Again Miss Treeves kissed her. "Joan," she said very tenderly.

"I wish you would always call me Joan, Miss Treeves. It would seem to bring you nearer to me—and I'm very lonely at times, for all your kindness."

"Of course I'll call you Joan! I must maintain my dignity, for business purposes, before all these

rural heathen ; but in future you shall be Joan to me, and I shall be Janet to you."

Joan pressed her hand. "For a long while I've thought of you as Janet. Both our names begin with J."

"Mine is Janet Cecilia in full," Miss Treeves explained. "And now there's something else—though perhaps not so important—I want to tell you. It was what Effie Draicot paid us a visit about. The house they live in is hers, and she is going to turn Zeekel out."

"Her—her brother?"

"Yes."

Miss Treeves wondered why Joan did not ask why. "I heard the house belonged to Miss Draicot," was all she said. She looked at the clock. "I must see to the vegetables." But as Miss Treeves moved away—"What has Zeekel done to be turned out?" Joan inquired, a benumbed look in her face.

"Nothing at all!"

"There must be something, Janet, or his own sister would not do it."

"Oh, I didn't want the woman's secrets," Miss Treeves cried.

"There is a secret, then?"

"Well, I suppose the old frump would give her nonsense that majestic appellation. There—she's sure to be gossiping all over the place; so I may as well tell you, Joan. Effie says—she says, my dear, that Zeekel has too much *regard* for you. Now it's out! That's all. And there's father trying to knock down the wall with his stick!"

The lilies of the valley under the beech hedge in the home park were to be taken up and transplanted in the gardens, and Zeekel, having found the turf too hard for a trowel, was using a spade, when Joan, going through a gap in the hedge, saw him at work. It was a radiant morning three days after sister Effie's visit to Miss Treeves. The sun shone in a blue and white sky; the rooks were in a vocal tempest down there among the mighty elms and beeches that seemed green in the sun, though not a leaf was yet out upon them. The grass, cropped close by the sheep, deadened Joan's footfall, and she drew near to Zeekel without his noticing her. The lameness was scarce perceptible now; she had spoken nothing of it to anyone; but Effie had said to Zeekel, "He's kicked her again; that's the sort of wife she is!"—so thinking, silly woman, to impress her brother with a sense of Mrs Potten's unworthiness.

And Zeekel that same night had taken one of his solitary walks in Parum wood, through the park on to the Little Colete road; and he had stopped on a sudden in the moonlight, his eyes staring, his shoulders working as though he were crushing something into the ground; and it was only when he was grown calmer that he said to himself, "Oh, God, you're that terrible slow sometimes!" . . .

But there was nothing of frenzy on Zeekel now, as Joan watched him digging up the lilies of the valley.

She remembered the days when she walked here in the evenings, in the summer night glow, when youth is immortal and sorrow uncreated—the days

when the sublimity of first love was upon her, and the wonder of her own womanhood—the pure and lovely days before the years of blight and the travail of the soul. And now, watching Zeekel at his work, a touch of the power and gracious tenderness of her girlhood ascended upon her it seemed from the grass on which she stood ; and she did not feel quite so old. Her face might be worn ; but youth still leapt in her heart.

He was strong, yet not stronger than other men ; but there was a force and grace in his limbs, as his body rose and fell over the spade, such as Joan had never seen in any other man.

“So you’re taking up the lilies, Zeekel.”

He turned to her, and nodded, but did not stop work.

“Ay, the Squire says they’ve been long enough here, for everybody to help themselves.”

“But he is not a very selfish gentleman, is he?”

“No, not uncommon selfish.”

Joan was standing behind him, beside a heap of roots with plenty of soil about them.

“I’m glad you’re able to come out for a stroll, Joan. It’ll freshen you up, mebbe,” he added quickly, for he did not want her to think he was hinting at the injury she tried to conceal.

“Yes, it will do me good. Janet Treeves—she says I’m to call her Janet now——”

“Ay, she’s a fine condescendin’ lady,” Zeekel remarked.

“She kept telling me it was wrong to stay indoors now the weather is so mild.”

He dug up more roots.

"We'll soon be in the thick of the hot days," he said.

Joan gazed across the hedge. The rooks swirled continually in the sweetened air, over the slopes of the park, out from the horizon of blinding light, over the Elizabethan mansion that would presently be obscured by the abundance of nature.

"Are you leaving your sister's house, Zeekel?"

"I donno for certain, Joan." He stood upright, facing her. "I hope Effie's not been with her foolish tales to you?"

"No, she has not been to see me."

"She's a funny woman," Zeekel said, lifting one foot on his spade. "She's got weary of the sight of me in the house, I suppose." He smiled rather pathetically. "That comes from her independence, no doubt, with money in the bank, and the free house father left her."

He added after a pause, without looking at Joan: "I'm sorry there's nothin' for you to sit down on but the grass. It's dry, if you'd like to rest." He knelt and spread his hands upon it.

"No, thank you; I must not stay. So you're not going to leave Effie?" she asked anxiously.

Zeekel gave a low laugh. "She's been havin' a vision in her sleep, and Nicholas says she was deep in her book of dreams for what it means."

"A dream about—about you?"

"I donno; she don't speak to me now. She writ out a bit of paper, and she's been deaf and dumb since."

"What was on the paper? But perhaps I've no right to ask."

"Oh, it was only her notice. The interpretation of her dream, I gather, is I've to be given grace till after sunset."

"After sunset—to-day?"

"So I hear from Nicholas. She found in her book at the proper place, 'Let not the sun go down on your wrath'; so I'm to be reprieved till dusk." Zeekel was laughing seriously to himself. "I'll tell her I'm not the man to be ruled by her ghost stories."

"But if you are compelled to leave, Zeekel—what will you do?"

"Oh, there's houses where they'd give me shelter. Why, Sally Catmer was on the watch for me this mornin', and offered to turn Roger Coe out and take me in for a lodger in his place. There's charity for you!"

"I'm glad you don't care much about it—about Sally, I mean. You would not go there?"

"Not for Roger to be made homeless. No, no; he's runnin' over himself to get to the workhouse as it is; and I donno if Sally and me would agree at the same table."

"I'm sure you would not! Now I must be going," said Joan, "to see to Martin's tea."

"I hear"—Zeekel resumed his work—"he's to be at the slate club feast at Thakeam to-night."

"Is it to-night? He didn't mention the matter."

"Mebbe he forgot. They wanted me to join in, but I'm not a member. If I should be your way this

evenin' I'll look in and give you the upshot of Effie's sunset wrath."

She answered nothing. Zeekel worked hard during the afternoon. Night had begun to fall when he shouldered his spade and carried it down to the tool-house.

CHAPTER V

It was dark when he got home. Effie was ironing. The table had been cleared of the tea things; a brilliancy of warmth and firelight filled the kitchen. Zeekel knew his sister had said to herself: "I'll not keep the tea another minute past the time for him"; this had frequently happened of late, and to Zeekel it was a very tantalising form of Effie's queerness. And to-night he wanted his tea.

He went out to the back, washed himself at the pump (Effie would have no messing in *her* house), and returning to the kitchen took a seat by the window. Effie's mouth remained shut; she had not spoken to him since he destroyed her "notice." Yet she was not so ill-disposed as her sullen silence suggested; for all this dazzling white linen had a consoling effect upon her.

She went on with her ironing, giving never a sign that she was conscious of Zeekel's presence. She would have regarded it as a loss of dignity to ask him whether his delay in coming home had been intentional or otherwise. Besides, he knew she always ironed on Friday. Twice Effie went into the back kitchen for the purpose of blowing her nose, lest this should be taken by her brother as a token of surrender on her part; and the blowing of Effie's nose, to be sure, was an expressive sort of performance. Zeekel thought of

saying, "It sounds the same in the distance, Effie"; but in the rosiest circumstances small success came from trying to get a bit of fun out of her; and the kettle was singing most aggravatingly on the hob. On a sudden—now grown a desperate man—he put the kettle on the fire; but Effie leisurely took it off again.

"Heigh-ho," sighed Zeekel, "then I suppose I'll have to go and ask somebody else to make me a cup of tea."

"*She'll* do it," said Effie.

Zeekel smiled. "I'm glad you've found your tongue at last; I was scared almost lest it should be stuck to the roof of your mouth." This was not said at all mockingly. "So you've been treatin' yourself to a new dream, I hear."

Then the floodgates of Effie's speech opened. "I'll not consult *you* about my dreams. No, nor that woman neither." Effie rustled handfuls of stiff linen. "Respectable us Draicots always have been, and choice in our company, with the fear of the Commandments before our eyes, and if there's them that's heedless of it I'll not be the one to let down our good name."

"Oh, keep it up, Effie, keep it up; I'll not seek to hinder you."

"Then what for do you go to—" She turned from him and began to hang the ironed things on a line across the fireplace. "I've given you notice accordin' to law, once, and you tearin' it up don't signify."

"Never mind the law, Effie. There'll be no law 'twixt you and me."

"If it comes to it then it must," said his sister; "but I'll be on the safe side."

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She fetched her father's ancient desk from under the bed, cleared a corner of the table, and sat down to write. Zeekel watched her.

"I'll be on the safe side for the law," she repeated.

"If that's another notice for me, Effie, you can spare yourself the trouble. I've never said I'd bide here if you don't want me."

But she finished the notice, and offered it to him, saying, "Second and last."

He took the paper and put it on the fire.

"Zeekel Draicot," said Effie, "I've done with you from this night."

"Seein' I'm your brother, I donno for that. I'll go, Effie, but I'll not read your nonsense on paper. When is my last day?"

"This night week."

"Oh, that's plenty of time. You'll not need to send for the constable to turn me out. Mebbe you'd like me to leave sooner."

"No. What I've said I've said. A week this night."

"I'll make a fixed note of it inside my head," said Zeekel.

And for half an hour more neither spoke. Then, as Zeekel was going out: "The door'll be locked," Effie called after him, "at ten o'clock sharp."

"I'll not be as late's that," said Zeekel; "and if I am Nicholas'll let me in."

He stopped outside the Coach and Horses to speak to Andrew Catmer. "I don't hear Roger with his concertina inside."

"Oh, he's off with Martin Potten to Thakeam for the club jollification," said Andrew.

Joan was just come in from the Treeves' when Zeekel got to her house. A candle was lighted on the table, and he said, "Only a candle."

"Martin was carrying the lamp into the scullery to see to his ferret, Joan explained, "and accidentally broke it."

Zeekel stood behind her. "He's gone to Thakeam, then."

"Yes—I suppose that's where he is. Roger came for him."

"He'll make him play merry tunes there and back. So he's left you with candlelight."

"I haven't any particular work to do," said Joan. "Won't you take a chair?" He drew one on to the hearth, close to hers. As he sat—"Has your sister told you about her dream?" Joan asked.

"Ay, as much as she thought I could stand; with another notice when her charity oozed out after sunset."

"Must you then leave her house?"

He screwed up his eyebrows humorously. "She's granted me a week's grace."

"Oh, Zeekel—I am the cause of this."

"You?"

"Yes, yes!——"

"Oh, no, Joan. It's only," added the clumsy fellow, "because Effie is that respectable."

"And I am not! And yet you come to see me. Zeekel! if you were to promise your sister that you'd never speak to me again she would let you stay with her."

"That would be a fine promise for a man to stomach."

"But it would make her withdraw her notice."

He said very calmly : "Ay, she might, but *I'd* not be in her house, or anybody's, on such terms." He stopped ; she was afraid to meet his eyes. "Joan, you look that wonderful in this soft light——"

"I can do needlework by it," she said nervously. "Oh, I do wish you would make it up with Effie."

"It could be done, but not from how she wants ; it's the aim she's taking beyond me I don't like. Our friendship, Joan, is not to be broke through by a matter of house-room, one way or other, or none at all. You'll be sure of that by now."

"Yes, I do value your friendship, Zeekel ; and you are too generous to—to take—advantage of my saying so. It is a great thing to me to know that one man respects me."

"I hope it's more than respect, Joan."

"Ah, don't say that ! I don't wish it to be more. Would you," Joan went on eagerly, "if I were to ask you—as a special favour—tell Effie you'll not speak to me again ?"

"I could never get the coward word out, Joan."

"But for my sake ?"

"I donno how it could be for your sake. If I was to do it Effie would be in a triumph, and that would be a slur on your character."

"My character, Zeekel ?" Joan wetted her dry lips with her tongue. "There's nobody but you thinks I have one." Her eyelids fell on tears. "Oh, I'm

so thankful for your kind thoughts of me ; but if you are made to suffer because of me——”

“It would never be sufferin’, Joan, whatever others believed.”

She stood up, and moved from him.

“You must stop coming here.”

“Even if I was to, that would make no change. None could change how I am towards you, Joan.” He put back his chair. “I’m anxious and willin’ to do what you want, but I hope you’ll not banish me from where you are. I’ll find fresh lodgin’s, never fear and it was shameful for them to tell you Effie had done it.”

“But it will be such a hardship for you to leave the house where you’ve always lived.”

“Well, for that—whether or no—it’ll never be said that Effie, or another woman, or any man either, forced me to so much as the appearance of ill-judgment of you. Joan,” he cried, “it’s more than respect !”

She held out her hands piteously towards him.

“Oh, don’t make me say of my own accord that you mustn’t come here again !”

He began to feel in his coat pocket. “I’d forgot them violets and daffodils.” He laid the flowers on the table. “They’ve a hangdog look, but they’ll revive in water if you keep them in the dark a while.” He took hold of her hands. “Joan, I’m in that terrible hunger of heart just for a touch of you.” She tried to draw away from him, but he held her in a strong, tender grasp. “It’s such a burden on me, every minute—you to be that man’s wife ! ——” He saw she

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was grieved, and let her go. "Is there never to be no difference of it for you, Joan?"

"I must not discuss such a matter with you, Zeekel." She brought some water in a basin, and put his flowers in it. "They will be quite fresh by the morning." She set the basin on the dresser beside the stuffed creatures. "You mustn't stay any longer, Zeekel; I promised to go in again and have supper with Miss Treeves."

He made for the door. "I'm havin' a run of luck for bein' turned out," he said cheerfully. "The night's but young. I donno but what I may stroll as far's Thakeam, and see what they're up to there."

CHAPTER VI

It was a starlit, still night, a silence brooding in it that seemed to hold all power and all mystery human and divine.

Thakeam was three miles from Harpsfield by the high road, but Zeekel went across the fields, and so shortened his walk. Thakeam, a village of importance, had a Norman church, bits of a Norman castle, and three public-houses, the most modern of which had a glaring frontage of coloured tiles and gilt wood-work. Young men and strangers were attracted by this architectural chromolithograph, but old-fashioned folk took more kindly to the Two White Pigeons, an ancient tavern in which were cosy nooks and corners where a man might cuddle himself up and gradually cease to be sober without fear of dislodgment.

The White Pigeons was the scene of the club feast. It was a quarter past ten when Zeekel got there ; and the inn would be closed at eleven, the magistrates having allowed an extra hour for the supper.

Not being a member, Zeekel hesitated to enter the place of revelry ; but the landlord, urging him, saying his friends were enjoying themselves, he went down the passage, and was just in time to see Martin Potten throw a man out. The door was shut, and it occurred to Zeekel that he ought to shun the noisy club-room, but the next minute he had made

up his mind to go in, whatever his reception might be.

For a certain man of Harpsfield had begun to speak. He was not now a dweller in the village, but Zeekel had been at school with him. He was telling a story in verse, amid confused noises. Zeekel had heard the story before, or rather scraps of it, not caring much for that sort of thing. This had been long years ago ; but Zeekel was sure the man was the same, for who but Jim Anscomb, the cause of the shame and despair which had driven Joan from her home, would take the pains to learn by heart such miserable stuff?

The only child of the Harpsfield tailor, he had been spoiled by parental flattery—that curse of so many intelligent children of the poor. He had been for a time a pupil teacher in the village school, and had written paragraphs of flamboyant inaccuracy for the local paper at Great Horsted. Later he had worked irregularly in the surrounding villages, quartering himself at intervals on his foolish parents, till their death left him homeless.

“ Mr Chairman, sir, and gentlemen all,” Jim Anscomb declaimed in the inflated vain manner of the vulgar half-educated mind, “ if Ted Lade will stop his nonsense I’ll give you the sad and highly immoral—I mean moral—story of Chaste Florimel,” and he began again—

“ No, I’ll endure ten thousand deaths
Ere any further I’ll comply—”

when there was a sudden uproar ; Jim yelled, “ He’s pinched my jam pot ! ” and Martin Potten roared a threat to wring Ted Lade’s neck.

"Horderorder!" cried the chairman.

There was at least one attribute of essential manhood (one had almost written essential greatness) in Zeekel Draicot's nature: in crises, especially moral crises, he could be self-possessed without conscious effort. It was now with him as though the very spirit of vengeance filled his being; yet he had no apparent struggle. The passion of it became part of his subliminal self—a soul-agony, a terrible subjective motive that should never betray itself till its work had been done. He calmly opened the door, and sat on the first vacant space of form he came to.

The room, crowded with men of all ages, and all of the toiling class, reeked with strong tobacco and bad beer. It would be harsh to say they had been drinking too much, for on such liquor an honest mind may speedily possess itself of stupidity. Zeekel was scarcely surprised to see that Roger Coe had fallen a victim: he was lying under a table, his adored concertina at his feet; Zeekel lifted it out of danger, and wondered how the silly fellow was to get home.

Jim Anscomb jumped on a chair and resumed his story. It was interrupted by his own bursts of laughter. But it was not the story that made Jim so merry; someone behind kept tickling him as he recited.

"Horderorder!" cried the chairman. "Jacob Toms, next time I name you it'll be final, and the company'll deal with you. Mr Anscomb here have give us genuine entertainment for his free welcome, and I summon him for his recitation."

"Hear, hear," said Anscomb, and went on. He

delivered Prior's lines with fair force and considerable fluency, pronouncing the words accurately, with the exception of Delia, which he gave as Dellia. At the last verse most of the men sent great ho—ho—hos out of their open-air lungs.

It was the first time Zeekel had heard the lines in their entirety. They made scarce any incision in his mind. He was absorbed in contemplating the extraordinary disfigurement of Jim Anscomb's face. He had expected to find him gay as ever, still handsome and light of tongue, prodigal as ever of his smiles and conquering ways, a mere froth of a man—but what monster of ugliness was this? From where Zeekel sat he could see only the left side of Jim's face, and it was hideous and loathsome, torn and scarred and discoloured, the eye apparently killed in its socket, ravaged as with the claw of some wild beast. The sores were healed, and the man appeared to be in no pain. Zeekel, for all there was no pity in him, felt sick at the sight.

How had it been done? It did not look like disease, but violence. There had been talk of Anscomb's having gone for a soldier, but Zeekel was in doubt as to whether this horrible branding had been done in the wars.

And now the young man, in a conceited bid for applause, turned to look down the room, and Zeekel was amazed to see that the right side of his face was totally uninjured. The change in its appearance was merely the change of time; for the rest it was exactly the smiling, happy, good-looking face that everybody in Harpsfield knew—the blue eye (not quite so im-

puidently brilliant now), the fair moustache, the attractive lines of the cheek and chin. So that Jim Anscomb was on the one side of his face a horror even to friendly eyes; and on the other side he was still the same Jim Anscomb. As no one sought to discuss the disfigurement, Jim had doubtless earlier in the evening explained it to the satisfaction of his old friends; but Zeekel was eager to learn how it had happened.

"I say, you chaps," Jim called out, "mind to lay that pathetic poem to heart, and give Dellia number two a chance!"

He doubled up with laughter.

"Ay," thought Zeekel, watching him, "he's not changed himself much. The face partly different, but not the man." He stooped and gave Roger a shaking. "Wake up, wake up," he whispered. "It's near on closin' time; and supposin' your new concertina was to be stole?" But Roger lay like a log.

And then Jim Anscomb came down to Zeekel, and in his jauntily familiar style said: "Well, old man, and how's the world using *you*?" He sat beside him; Zeekel again tried to rouse Roger, but answered civilly: "Oh, pretty fair, considerin'. Roger! you addled music-man—you'll get left behind. And what," he asked, turning to Anscomb, "have you been doing with yourself all this while?"

"Oh, I've been about a bit, you know, seeing the world."

"Ay, seein' the world. A big place, I doubt not," Zeekel remarked; and, nodding at Jim's scars, "Is that," he added, "part of the sight-seein'?"

"This," said Jim, touching his left cheek and smiling on his right—"this is the outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual heroism for which I've not yet been awarded the Victoria Cross." He laughed at his own cock-sparrow cleverness. "How's everybody in the old place?" he asked.

"Oh, much the same. I donno if anybody but you has been to see the world." Zeekel lowered his eyes to the prostrate musician. "The old rector's dead," he said.

Jim Anscorb was smiling to himself. He glanced back, still smiling, at Martin Potten. "It's funny," he whispered, "he should have married her."

Zeekel continued to be interested in Roger. "Ay," he said in tones that were to Jim simply hard and dull, "there's sometimes funny things happen, even when we don't wander forth to have a look over the world."

"I say, you know, I was fond of that woman," said Jim.

Zeekel suddenly took hold of Roger's hand. "Oh, you sleepy-headed man, with all that rank ale in your inside!"

"I've come across a few in my adventures," Anscorb went on, "just a few you bet, but never one fit to stand in her shoes. Martin's jealous, ain't he? Bound to be!"

"Not that I've noticed in partic'ler," Zeekel replied. This feeble, long, womanish hand of Roger's seemed to be absorbing his attention.

"Martin's not said a word to me about her yet."

And then Zeekel lifted his head. "There's some

things it's best not to speak of." He looked at Jim, and that adventurer's smile vanished. "Also, Jim, there's some things best not thought of."

A man, swaying his head and arms behind the chairman, was roaring out the national anthem.

"Time to clear out," said Anscomb. "I want another drink."

"Just a minute," said Zeekel. "What's wrong with your face?"

"Oh, that's the work of an infernal great dog. Ain't I a piebald beauty? I was in the hospital for weeks. Look at this glorious eye!"

"I can only see the part that's left," said Zeekel.

"I thought my bloomin' head was gnawed off. But this side's all right." He grew light-hearted again.

"If it was both sides the same," Zeekel remarked, "you'd need a ticket on your forehead for identification purposes. It's enough to give a sinkin' feelin' to them that covet your company for your looks."

"You're getting at me, Zeekel."

"Well, then, let's hear the full and true account of how it was done."

"I can't now; here's the landlord to give us the chuck."

"Where's Roger Coo?" Martin called out from the door. "The drunken young idiot! I'll soon fetch him out of that." He took hold of Roger's feet and dragged him from under the table. But Roger was as one dead; and the landlord said he'd be safe to lie there till the morning; he would bring a rug and cover him up, and put a cushion under his head.

Everyone was boisterously good-natured outside the Two White Pigeons. Jim Anscomb went into the middle of the road and began to sing at the top of his voice, till Martin Potten took hold of him, and led him away. They went off arm in arm, Zeekel following.

He was not noticed by the strange pair in front, until they had left Thakeam perhaps half a mile behind, and were come to an old Nonconformist chapel, on the steps of which Martin and Jim seated themselves. Martin banged his back on the door, and Jim sang an outrageous song.

"Hullo, Zeekel, I thought you'd gone on before," said Anscomb. "There's room for you here. Shut up, Martin; you'll smash the door in."

"Let's try," said Potten, "it's only a gospel shop."

He renewed the assault with tremendous vigour: the door creaked and groaned, and hollow sounds were heard. He gave up, and said to Jim: "That pot of jam in your pocket—now tell how you came by it. Thieved it, I'll swear!"

"No; I got it through a fair bet with Jacob Toms. He said I couldn't; I said I would." Anscomb chortled. "Now for my tale of jam. The lady was in the garden hanging out her clothes."

"No foolery," said Martin.

"I talked to her like a heart-broken father. She'd had her own domestic tragedies, dear soul. I told her how my poor wife was dying (I forget the disease), my children starving, and I out of work. And lo the sympathetic creature wept!"

"Humbug—you haven't got a wife;" Martin

lunged at Anscomb with his shoulder, and sent him sprawling.

"Dry up, Martin; you've cracked the pot, I believe."

"Hope I have."

Jim felt in his pocket. "No, it's all right." Having seated himself again: "I tipped her the pathetic blarney, and she said she'd give me a slice of cake for my skeleton kids. So I went with her up to the house to have a look in——"

"Ah—more knowledge of the world," Zeekel interpolated.

"Him seeing the world," Martin put in. "I'll wager he's been in gaol half the time."

"No—only once," said Jim. "I got seven days for sleeping out. Call this a free country! Anyhow, I've not been a prosy stay-at-home; I've been there and back to see how far it is."

"I donno if it's that wonderful far," Zeekel remarked, "when you come to think of it." He looked up to the glittering heavens, then over the darkened still earth. "You get a lot of it under your nose, on a starry night, for nothin'."

"You ought to be kicked, Jim," said Martin; "you sneaked it."

They resumed their journey.

Zeekel presently said in a very quiet tone to Anscomb: "I doubt whether your old lodgin's will be vacant."

"He's impudence for a dozen men," said Martin, "but he'd not have the cheek to go there. He bolted without paying up." Potten, after a pause, added

sullenly : " You're going home with me, Jim ; I'll put you up for the night."

There was a sudden arrest in Zeekel Draicot's body from crown to toe. But he said nothing, and went on ; Martin was now a few steps in front of the other two.

Jim nudged Zeekel. " Ain't there some funny things about ? " he whispered.

Potten wheeled round, aggression in his pose as he cried : " What was that you said, Zeekel ? "

" He never spoke," said Jim quickly ; " I was only asking him if he's too drunk to see the milky way."

" It's my house," Martin growled.

" Ay," Zeekel said reflectively, " you pay the rent."

" And I'll do what I like in it ! "

" Ay," Zeekel said again, passing him.

They walked in silence.

" Here's another stile," Zeekel said ; and to himself — " Jim Anscomb don't darken Joan's door this night." His mind was made up to that ; and he would maintain it by force if necessary. " Mebbe," he said, " my sister Effie might find you some sort of bed."

" He's coming home with me," Potten repeated. He strode past Zeekel as he spoke, filling the air with menace.

Anscomb whispered to Zeekel : " She'll never know I'm there. I'll clear out before she's up."

Zeekel's leisurely " Ay " was heard ; then he asked Jim about the injury to his face.

" Now to make your hair bristle," Jim began,

flourishing his arm dramatically. "It was a lovely night in the time of harvest——"

"Sounds like lies to start with," said Martin.

"Oh, you don't appreciate artistic garnish, old chap. I stick to that harvest moon. I was on the prowl in the fair land of Bucks. Of course I called at Windsor Castle, but the duffers had nothing to give me but some psalm-singing in St George's Chapel. A couple of days later I found myself in Stoke Pogis churchyard, and hunted up old Gray's tomb. I squatted on it and spouted his Elegy to the poetic ashes."

"Liar," said Martin.

Jim bumped against Zeekel in a fit of laughter. "I got up on his last by-by crib and danced on his poor old chest."

"You'd be frightened to," said Martin—"the biggest coward that ever crawled out of Harpsfield!"

For a while no one spoke; Zeekel's gaze was fixed on Joan's husband in constrained admiration.

"It was that night I came to a farm that looked a snoozly place for a doss. I climbed a wall, and then got over a hayrick." Jim sniffed. "I can smell the hay now. Thinking all was safe, I dropped on the other side of the rick, and down I plumped—my good lord—right on top of that hell-hound!"

"He'd soon be at your throat," Martin cried.

"In two twos!"

"You'd set up a fine yellin', I doubt not," Zeekel observed.

"I don't know about that. I said to myself this is kingdom come, and you bet I thought of all the prayers I hadn't said."

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"What a memory the man has," Zeekel put in.

"So would anybody. The fiend made mincemeat of me. In half a jiff I was trussed for a butcher's shop."

"But it showed the true manful spirit," Zeekel said, "you not to yell."

"I was worried out of my senses. The next time I recognised myself I was in the hospital. They shot the brute. It was worth fifty pounds."

Potten gave his mirthless laugh. "More than you are!"

"But, I say, I lived on clover in that hospital, and the cranky that owned the dog gave me a tenner. Where are we now?"

"That's Selscombe over there," said Zeekel.

"Then we're near Harpsfield."

Martin stopped. "I'm hungry as a hawk. Let's have a taste of that jam." He caught hold of Anscomb.

"What sort is it?"

"I don't know."

"Let's have a look."

"Shut up, Martin!"

"I want a dab of that stolen jam."

"It wasn't stolen!"

"Come on; deliver it up, Jim!"

"Well, how much'll you take?"

"Only half."

"You'll not get it then!"

"Huh—so you'll defy me!"

"Don't be a fool, Martin—you're hurting my arm."

Martin tugged Jim's hand out of his pocket. He seized Zeekel for protection, but Martin tore him away,

and gave his arm a wrench. Jim swore ; Martin gave him another wrench, and Jim groaned and swore again.

"I see you've not forgot that little touch. You'll get another if you don't look sharp and hand it over."

"Zeekel, don't let him !" Jim pleaded.

But Zeekel remained neutral. "I'm willin' to be the umpire with you two at your games."

"Now, Jim, I'll give you three chances. Once."

"Well, how much do you want ?"

"The whole of it now. Twice !"

"Shut up, Martin !"

"Thrice !"

Potten gripped Jim round the waist ; Jim uttered a blasphemy. Martin, possessed of the pot, stood off.

"I told you I would. Think you'll master me ? Not a man in these parts could do it !" He walked on.

"I'll only take half," he called back.

CHAPTER VII

ANSCOMB was standing in a bent position. "He's twisted my knee out of joint, I believe, the devil! Give's your arm, old chap." He made for Zeekel, but stopped, groaning.

"Let's see," said Zeekel; but Jim had fallen before he could catch hold of him.

Martin had got through a hedge, and was out of sight. Zeekel stood looking down at Jim. He was scarce more than a poisonous reptile writhing on the ground. If he should die—if he should be left to die in the night—what would it matter? The very soil, clean mother earth, seemed to rebel against his prostration on it. But he was a wounded man, and the chivalrous instinct was strong in Zeekel.

"Can you stand?"

"I think I can. I don't know if I can walk. Where's that murderous fool?"

"He'll not come back."

"I hope he will," said Jim significantly; "I'm to be his guest to-night."

"So that's in your head," said Zeekel. "Then I may as well tell you, whether Martin comes back or no, you're not going to his house."

"Why not?"

Zeekel's feet seemed to grip the earth; his hands were clenched by his sides.

"You're not going to his house this night!"

"You don't explain much," Jim remarked rather timidly.

"No, I don't. I decide," said Zeekel.

"But there's Martin."

"I decide with him the same!"

"All right," said Jim querulously. He could walk, though with pain. "Where's Martin?"

"Lean on me," said Zeekel, "as hard's you like, and leave Martin to himself. We'll be on the high road soon, and then I'll give you a lift."

"But where am I to sleep?"

"Well, I doubt if there's many open doors in Harpsfield at this hour. It must be past midnight."

Anscomb moaned that he wished he had stopped at Thakeam: he only came because Martin made him.

"Why shouldn't he take me in till morning?"

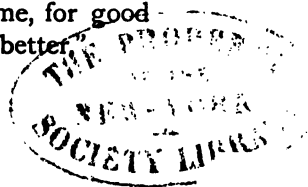
"If that animal that worried you was to ask me such a question," said Zeekel, "I'd tell him to be a decent dog."

"Draw it mild," said Jim; "I'm not as bad's that. I confess it was a bit shabby, me to leave her in the lurch, so to speak. But I didn't think of it at the time, and after all——"

"Leave her alone!" Zeekel cried. "She never was what you are—never was—never could be! But no more of this. You're not going to her house, and so that settles it."

"Has she a grudge against me?"

"I've never heard her speak your name, for good or ill, and the less you say about her the better."



"I heard she'd turned religious," said Jim; "but you're making her out a saint."

"I'm not sure if I could tell a saint from a good woman," Zeekel replied in his grave, deliberate tones.

They were on the turnpike road; Zeekel had led Jim thither in the hope of escaping from Martin.

"What about the knee?"

"Fearful—I can't go on."

"I'll give you a carry." He stooped, and lifted the injured man on his back. "I'll take you to our house."

"But your sister'll kick up a row, won't she?"

"We'll risk that. An injured man can't be left out of doors in March."

"You're a good sort after all, Zeekel. I didn't really want to go to Martin's. I say, won't he be having a curse to himself?"

They reached the village; and when they were come to Effie's door Zeekel let Jim down, and gave a tap on the kitchen window.

Nicholas almost noiselessly unfastened the door.

"Who's that, Zeekel?" he whispered.

"Sh—it's only Jim Anscomb come home with a queer face and his leg sprained. Don't make a fuss to wake Effie. Go in and light the lamp. Here, give me out the matches; I'll strike one on my hand, so's she'll not hear."

The light revealed the fireplace decorated with lines of spotless linen. Zeekel, having let Jim pass in, shut the door and pointed to the sofa.

"Best sleep in your clothes. If your leg gets worse don't groan loud."

Nicholas was gazing at Jim. "What's been done to your face?" he said in an awed whisper.

"You jump into bed," said Zeekel, "and don't have a nightmare."

Just then an inner door was thrown open, and Effie appeared, a huge white figure, filling the doorway.

"Who's this man?"

"It's Jim Anscomb come back."

"James Anscomb!"

"Ay; but you've no call to be frightened of his face. It's healed up."

"What's he doin' in my house?"

"He's met with a mishap, and I wondered if he could sleep on the sofa—for only one night."

Sister Effie appeared to grow larger still in her raiment of white linen and lace. Jim had to make an effort to keep serious at sight of that astounding thing on her head.

"James Anscomb, you'll leave my house this very minute!"

"But he's nowhere else to go, Effie."

"He'll not sleep under my roof! Let him seek shelter from them that have a right to his company!"

"That's enough," said Zeekel to Jim. "You'll have to go."

"Oh—but look at his face," said Nicholas from the bed.

"Shut up about my face," Jim cried. "What's it got to do with anybody?"

"My house has to do with me!" said Effie. "James Anscomb——"

"I know my name, old lady," Jim interrupted

peevishly. "You needn't keep slinging it out as if——"

"That'll do," said Zeekel.

"He'll leave my house," Effie exclaimed, "before I stir from this door."

"Oh, if she's going to keep guard over me, then I'm off," said Jim. "Martin Potten will take me in; I'll probably be there as soon's he is."

Zeekel turned to his brother. "Fasten the door after me, Nicholas." He put on his hat.

"Zeekel Draicot——" said Effie, "where are you goin'?"

"Out with Jim Anscumb."

"You needn't come with me, old chap—I'll be all right."

"If you go from my house this night," said Effie to her brother, "you'll never sleep in it again."

"I'll need to come for my things," said Zeekel.

"You'll find them in the garden at daybreak!"

"Now, old man, be sensible!" Jim pleaded.

But Zeekel opened the door.

"You're a woman to stick to what you say, Effie. I've packed my box, but the rope'll want tyin'. You'll see to that for me, Nicholas, in case there should be robbers passin' at my early flittin'."

"Good-bye, Zeekel Draicot!"

"Well, if it's to be good-bye, then good-bye, Effie."

"Zeekel!——" Nicholas called.

But he went out with Jim Anscumb; and the door of the home in which he had been born and had lived all his life was locked and bolted upon him.

The night was darker, colder; Jim, bitten by the

chill after his brief stay in the kitchen, shivered and turned up his coat collar, muttering sulkily to himself.

"What's the move now?"

"Oh, we'll manage to keep our blood alive," Zeekel answered vaguely.

He made Jim go with him to Parum wood; and they passed the night under the trees, Jim at length falling asleep on a heap of old leaves, which had been blown up to an old grey wall that seemed to have grown out of the ground. Draicot leaned on it for hours with sleepless eyes.

The stillness of the wood, the greatness of the night, the familiar faint noises of the creatures of the dark, these influences gradually lulled his stormy spirit, and he became almost reconciled to Ascomb's being there, close to him.

He could deal with the vicious mountebank later; for to-night it was enough that he should be out of mischief's way.

Nevertheless Zeekel was in a torment of thought. Again and again there shot through his brain the question: "What will he do?" What would Martin say to Joan when at last he should be forced to go home alone? He tried to picture the scene. . . . He put his back to the wall and looked up at the stars. . . . What was that Jim had said about thinkin' of his prayers?

Anscomb moved, and muttered in his sleep. He lifted a hand on his breast and sighed. It was as though the sigh entered into Zeekel; his scornful loathing of his prisoner was softened by a flash of pity. If by some magic word he could have made a

decent man of him he would have done it, and let him go.

Again he recalled Jim's profession of faith ; that was a very queer thing to Zeekel. It brought him to humanity's crowning perplexity—Somebody up there, or nearer—nearer to-night, somehow ; moving everywhere ; the Friend of Joan, the Friend even of this base life stretched on dead leaves at his feet.

And then Zeekel came to the consciousness of his own absolute isolation before this unfathomable Presence. He held awed communion with a something in him that could never be anything but itself : could never stand with another for appeal or for judgment. No, not even with Joan. She was in all the hush of the wood—yet he was by himself in this ultimate loneliness.

He let his gaze fall on Anscomb. The bruised face was pitiful to see in the wan light ; the hand on the breast looked as feeble as poor Roger's. Zeekel took off his overcoat, and spread it upon the sleeping man.

Jim was still asleep at dawn, and Zeekel's vigil continued. But now for the first time he felt shivery. He gazed out through the trees. " It's to be a fine day," he said to himself.

He had not once during this long night sought comfort in the reflection that he was doing a thing in any way heroic.

CHAPTER VIII

HARPSFIELD, the next day, talked of Zeekel's ejection and the return of Jim Anscomb.

Miss Treeves, immediately after breakfast, ran in to see Joan, who was going about her housework as usual, and had apparently been told of Anscomb's reappearance. Miss Treeves' curls were in a full gale, and Joan's living room was altogether too small to hold her. She threw the window wide open without asking leave, and strode round and round the table, making Joan smile.

"You'll let him stay in the village and make no protest!"

"I really couldn't do anything, Janet."

"Then I can, and will!" cried Miss Treeves. She stopped before Joan. "You don't seem to be very much upset at his coming back?"

"It can't be helped, Janet. I owe it to myself not to think about him."

Miss Treeves opened the front door. "The very thought of the ruffian makes me gasp for breath! And here have I been flattering myself all these years that he was drowned, or shot, or hanged!" Again she stood, or rather swayed, before Joan. "But you wouldn't speak to him?"

"Not unless it were necessary."

"But could it possibly *ever* be necessary? Has Martin said anything to you about him?"

"He told me last night he had returned."

"And taunted you?"

"I didn't say that, Janet."

"Oh, my dear! you needn't tell me; I know well enough how he'd behave. Joan, Joan, what a wife you'd have been to a good man!"

"Janet, that's just where it is; no good man would have married me. I hadn't any right to expect it. Perhaps it would have been better had I not married at all. But it seemed to me—I hoped—that Martin might be different afterwards, and I did want to call some place my home."

Miss Treeves kissed her. "How bravely you say it! And your saying you didn't expect a good husband convinces me you deserved one."

Late in the morning Miss Treeves had an exciting adventure with her arch female enemy, Sally Catmer, over the disposal of Zeekel's box; and, after ignominiously routing Sally, she decided to call at the rectory.

"I shall begin with Mr Mewett," she told her parents, whom she invariably consulted, and whose advice she invariably ignored; "and if he declines to do anything, then I shall be worked up into just the right temper to go straight down and make an attack on the Squire."

"The Squire," said Miss Treeves' mother, holding up her hands; "O, dear me, good gracious me, Janet!"

"He'll make you blush," said her father, "with his

high-bred coarseness. As for Effie, she'll not listen to squire or parson where her own house is concerned."

Nevertheless, Miss Treeves, attired in her latest finery, and with her curls spread out in full glory over her shoulders, went to the rectory and asked to see Mr Mewett. The house-maid showed her into the study, but was not particularly civil, being nettled by Miss Treeves' proud, stand-off manner.

"I'm not sure if Mr Mewett isn't engaged."

"Tell him from me," commanded Miss Treeves—"inform him, if you please, that Miss Treeves desires to consult him on a subject of the utmost vital importance."

It was mid-morning, and a delightful day, as Zeekel had prophesied at the end of his vigil in the wood. Miss Treeves had not been invited to take a chair. She was, indeed, too agitated to sit down. The big double window was open, and the sunlight lay on the beautiful valley toward Little Colete. The rectory garden was bright with spring flowers. Miss Treeves tried to tranquillise herself by gazing steadily at the daffodils under the trees.

Still no one came; and the dressmaker, in a growing impatience, made a keenly critical inspection of the study. It was handsomely furnished, with valuable books in the cases, and expensive magazines on the writing-desk and the tables. The desk was of carved oak; costly ornaments decorated the room. Fine lace on bullion before the mantel-piece too! And the ormolu clock on it must have been worth more than she could earn in six months! She began to have a suffocated feeling, and did not quite understand

why. It was not solely due to her vexation at being kept waiting so long. Perhaps there was something of the spirit of Zeekel Draicot in her, less profound and sincere and therefore less gloomy, and finding expression in criticism of small things rather than in moody introspection on great principles and elemental causes.

Perhaps it was owing to the sharpness of contrast between these lives and her own life ; she had to work so hard, often day and night, for so little, with bitter moments in which she had visions of dainties for her beloved mother and invalid father which she could not afford to buy. Or it may have been attributable, in part at any rate, to the insistence of Mrs Mewett's personality, her likes and dislikes, in all this self-satisfied luxury. If it was due to any unworthier motive you must make your own condemnation of Miss Treeves.

Cheerfulness had been the "note" of the rectory since ex-Captain Mewett and his very modern wife had quartered themselves there. The old-fashioned atmosphere was gone : all the subdued tones, the stately quietude, the companionable seriousness of the former Rector's time had been obliterated by Mrs Mewett's insatiable craving for newness in upholstery and decorative effects. She was so in love with cheerfulness that it almost amounted in her to a mental disease. She would not have a doleful person near her if she could help it ; and should a servant be overtaken by any trouble, just enough to make her mope, she must pack up and go.

Mrs Mewett was the sworn foe of all unhappy sad

things in her own home life ; she simply would not tolerate them about her, whether of sight or sound. There no doubt was a good deal of misery and squalor in the world ; one couldn't deny that—it might even be out there, at her very door, in that stupid and colourless little place in which she was compelled by her husband's extraordinary religious ideas to live ; there might be sorrow in Harpsfield, the tears and despair of women, the tragic anguish of men, the suffering of little children, ideals crumbling in the dust for lack of sympathy, souls in rebellion against themselves, their fellows, their God—but Mrs Mewett would have none of it ; she turned to it deaf ears and blind eyes ; cheerful she must be.

She had not asked to be brought into this trumpery dull world, where there was no society, where all the men and women were common workers, for ever talking (when rarely she had patience to listen to them) about their families, their ailments, the weather as it was to-day and would be to-morrow ; and where the singing in church set Mrs Mewett's teeth on edge. So the splendid lady, in self-preservation, courageously and resolutely devoted herself to diminishing the ennui of her enforced exile by making her personal surroundings as bright and comfortable as possible.

She would feed the birds on her window-sill, for that was a pretty thing to do, and of course a Christian act, especially when they happened to be vulgar sparrows ; and she was most kind to her Belgian collie, which sauntered about her lovely rooms as the equal of the servants at least ; and she subscribed regularly to several authenticated Church societies.

But Mrs Mewett really could not take to those villagers. They did not interest her. She was willing that they should have the crumbs that fell from her table, but it was so difficult to know whether they were deserving, particularly as she did not know them at all. She was too far away from them to understand that her home might have been brighter still, in a noble and more satisfying way, had she helped them to brighten theirs.

She felt no prickings of conscience on the subject. She was indifferent to parish affairs; her heart was untouched by that passion for the poor without which a rural clergyman's wife is a curse and not a blessing to his people. She solaced the tedium of her existence with much reading of fiction, and it was all cheerful fiction. She knew of only one serious book—the Bible; but, however deep her study of it may have been, she did not talk about it. She found the Prayer Book fairly cheerful; one got so used to it; and in letters to friends she vowed that at all events she was no hypocrite.

Miss Treeves was beginning to feel "like a caged lioness," when the door opened, and Mrs Mewett appeared. She did not enter the study. "How did this woman get in here?" That is not what Mrs Mewett said: it is what Miss Treeves imagined her as saying.

"Oh. You wish——?" Mrs Mewett paused on the note of interrogation. It was quite in the Rector's military style, flavoured with feminine patronage.

"I wish to see Mr Mewett," said Miss Treeves ready for battle.

"I doubt if he can come to you. He is engaged. Is it important?"

"It is not my affair," said Miss Treeves, "but I assure you it is most urgent."

"Will you not tell me?"

"No!—" The word was out in a flash. "I beg your pardon," said Miss Treeves, "but you won't do. How long will the Rector's engagement last? I'm very busy just now, but I'm willing to spare a little more time for the good of others"; this in a tone which implied that that was more than somebody else was willing to do.

"I presume," said Mrs Mewett, "that your neighbours are in trouble again among themselves."

"That is so, but it is altogether too trivial to interest you," Miss Treeves answered.

"Indeed," said Mrs Mewett. She was a stout woman, dwarfish in stature compared with Miss Treeves: her small, bird-like head was covered with frizzy white hair, and her alert eyes, set close to a sharp nose, gave her face a keen expression. "As you seem to be so anxious to see the Rector I will tell him you are here."

Mrs Mewett vanished; and presently after the Rector came bounding into the study. "He has been smoking—*that* was his engagement!" Miss Treeves said to herself, and was so wrathful that very little provocation would have tempted her to a vigorous attack on the whole clerical system.

"This is an early call, Miss Treeves."

"Yes!" She flung the word at him, feeling sorry

it was not bigger. "It can never be too early to do one's duty!"

The Rector, who had shut the door and taken a chair, made his plump little figure very stiff. He seemed to swell all to chest and red and purple face. He had a soldier's scent for insubordination.

"Aha—so you've come to teach me my duty."

"No, sir—I have called to remind you of it." Miss Treeves was not going to be bullied by any man. "I am here to speak to you about Zeekel Draicot and his sister. There is another matter—but I will not refer to that now, although it is breaking a woman's heart."

"Please be seated," the Rector said, stroking his grey moustache, which grew down to his jaw bone. "Now let me hear your complaint."

"Miss Draicot has turned her brother out of her house!"

The Rector's breath did not seem to be taken away. "I understood he lived with her. I see Miss Draicot at church regularly."

"She may go to church a thousand times a day," cried Miss Treeves, "but that does not prevent her from being a heartless old woman!"

"What," Mr Mewett asked, "has Draicot done to offend his sister?"

"Nothing at all! He is a brave, honest, unselfish man—that is his only offence."

"But these are scarcely qualities to get a man into trouble."

"My dear gentleman!"—Miss Treeves' curls jumped about her ears—"what *are* you saying? Try them;

just give them a week's trial, and see if you won't get in hot water! I speak from experience," said Zeekel's champion.

The Rector scratched his eyebrows.

"Well, Draicot must find other lodgings. Meanwhile, if it will be of any convenience to him, he is at liberty to put his box in one of the rectory out-houses."

Miss Treeves almost leapt out of her chair.

"Why not the pig-sty at once, and have done with it?" she cried.

"Really, you are very unreasonable;" Mr Mewett drew up his knees, as though about to rise and end the interview.

"I suggest, sir, that you call on Miss Draicot and insist on her taking her brother back."

But Mr Mewett shook his head. "I could hardly do that. The house, I understand, is her own, and one is always on delicate ground in interfering in domestic concerns."

"But this is a public scandal!"

"I might, perhaps, make a friendly remark to Miss Draicot on the subject. Has Draicot taken his box to the Coach and Horses?"

"Oh dear no!" said Miss Treeves. "I heard that Sally Catmer was making overtures to him to convey it to her house, and I said at once, 'Not *there*, wherever it goes!' So I made Zeekel bring it to our house. But we can't keep him, and there's no lodgings for him in the village except at Sally Catmer's. Horrible!" said Miss Treeves; "I would rather let him have my bed and sleep on the kitchen floor myself than he should go *there*!"

Mr Mewett rose. "I may say, Miss Treeves, that I attach no importance to what I have heard in regard to Draicot and Mrs Potten. I believe them both to be self-respecting people."

A rush of tears came to Miss Treeves' eyes. "Now I can forgive you everything," she said impulsively. She reddened, and the Rector blinked more than ever. "And now, sir, as if poor Joan's cup wasn't full to overflowing, James Anscomb has come back!"

"James Anscomb," said the Rector, "who is he?"

And Miss Treeves described Jim's characteristics with a realism such as Mr Mewett was not accustomed to out of the Hebrew prophets.

"Have not the authorities," she asked, "power to order him to leave the village?"

The Rector was afraid no one had any such power.

"If he had stolen a reel of cotton out of my work-basket," said Miss Treeves, "I could have put him in prison for it." She looked straight into the Rector's eyes. "He didn't do that!"

"I am very sorry for Mrs Potten," said the Rector, opening the door.

"There will be crime in our midst," said Miss Treeves, going out, "before these things are ended. And you are all looking on and doing nothing!"

"By the way, I have not noticed you at church lately——"

"My mother goes," said Miss Treeves, eager to give the Rector a parting shock, "and that's enough for one family!"

She set off with her manly stride. She went

through the park to the beautiful Elizabethan house among the trees. Of course nothing short of the main entrance would do for Miss Treeves. The door, wide open, was without a knocker, and there was no bell that she could see. She boldly went into the great hall, and for the first time saw those "disgusting spectacles," the Squire's famous nude statues, standing round the dark oak panelling. A servant in livery appeared and said Mr Burward was at luncheon.

"Please ask him if he will be kind enough to see me."

The servant presently returned, and bidding the visitor follow him, conducted her into a room of venerable splendour, where Mr Burward was seated alone at luncheon, four or five dogs about him. One growled, and the Squire growled at the dog. "He looks," thought Miss Treeves, "like a man whose natural language would be improper." He was no sportsman, but was rarely seen, indoors or on his estate, unaccompanied by several dogs. In his misanthropy he cultivated the shallow Byronic cynicism, the deep Byronic egotism.

"The local milliner?"

"I make dresses," said Miss Treeves, "for the most respectable families in the neighbourhood."

"Glad to hear it," said the Squire; "I hope they pay you. Well, what do you want? I don't wear furbelows and flounces."

He helped himself to a glass of Chateau-Lafite. Miss Treeves was more afraid of him than of the Rector. His goatish face was clean shaven and

strangely freckled, large dull-pink spots on an ashen ground ; his black dead-glowing eyes were surmounted by thick black eyebrows that shot fiercely upward and looked as if they had been waxed and dyed ; his hair was long and white.

Miss Treeves stated Zeekel's predicament.

"But the cottage is not mine. I can't force people to give him house room. What mischief has he been up to? Some woman in the affair, I suppose. Are you in love with him?"

Miss Treeves' face went crimson.

"Certainly not! I shouldn't come to you if I were!"

The Squire smiled, and let a piece of toast drop into the open jaws of a retriever.

"What would you do?"

This he asked to put her in a fix.

But Miss Treeves had recovered her spirit.

"I should marry him *immediately*."

The Squire laughed, and all the dogs began to wag their tails. "I like that. I won't ask you to take a seat, because I don't entertain ladies." Mr Burward had never married. His early life had been disreputable, and much of it had become public property. No one knew why for nearly twenty years he had shut himself up in this old house without a single companion. "Now tell me what you want."

"It occurred to me that you might use your influence to compel his sister——"

"Nonsense, nonsense." The Squire broke more bread for his dogs. "Draicot's an excellent fellow, and sticks to his work. There are a couple of vacant

rooms in the almshouse ; he can have them if the old women will look after him. He'll have to pay them as much as he'd pay in lodgings, so I daresay they'll not object. I'll speak to the steward about it. Will you have a glass of claret ? ”

“ No, thank you.”

“ Not to drink my health ? ”

“ No—thank you, Mr Burward ! ”

“ Nor Draicot's ?——”

“ Good day to you,” said Miss Treeves.

She walked home with burning cheeks.

“ Mother, I've beaten Effie ! ”

And then Miss Treeves sat down and had a good cry.

CHAPTER IX

IN the dinner hour of the day on which Zeekel carried his belongings to the almshouse, Nicholas Draicot, on his way to work, called in at the Coach and Horses for Roger Coo. Jim Anscomb and Andrew Catmer were there, and Nicholas listened awhile to their conversation, though it was very repugnant to him.

"She's a different stamp of woman," said Andrew, "from what she was a gell."

"Oh, I know all about that," said Jim; "I've got the whole alphabet of the sex at my finger-tips."

Nicholas frowned. "You'd catch it if Martin was to hear you."

"Hullo, young innocent." Jim was perched on the corner of a table, swinging his legs.

"Mrs Potten's of a soft and forgivin' disposition," said Andrew, "but a woman forsook in your style, Jim, don't forget in a hurry."

"Look here, then, I'll bet two to one I'll go to her house and have a nice little chat with her."

"You're a thunderin' great liar," said Nicholas Draicot—"with that face too!"

"If you're so cock-sure, my lambing-season friend, why don't you take up my bet? Two to one," laughed Jim.

"In shillin's, laid down?" Andrew asked.

"He's not got as much," Nicholas taunted.

"Oh, haven't I!" Jim produced a handful of silver and copper. "Aha!——"

"You never worked for it," sneered Nicholas. He blamed Anscomb for being the main cause of Zeekel's ejection; and being alone in the house with Effie did not improve the boy's temper.

"If I was a young man," said Sally's father, "I'd take him up on the spot."

"I'll not wager about her in a public-house!"

"You take him up, Roger."

"I haven't got a shillin' to lay down, Mr Catmer."

"If I was you, Nick, I'd not let Jim swagger over me," said Andrew.

"He's got the fear of sister Effie on him," mocked Anscomb.

The boy thrust his hand into his pocket, but instantly pulled it out again.

"No, I'll not!" he cried. "I'd be ashamed to look at her after; and Martin would be mad."

Jim grew very merry. "Now he's in a blue terror for what Martin would do to him!"

"No I'm not then!" And now Nicholas produced a shilling. "I don't care—I'll take you!" he said with excitement. "But who's to prove he's done it?"

"Andrew can follow me and watch."

A few minutes later Jim left the tavern in his gayest mood. Joan's humiliation did not for a moment occur to him. No one was in Dripping-pan lane. Knowing Miss Treeves' opinion of him, Jim slipped swiftly past the dressmaker's window, and knocked at Joan's door the instant he came to it.

As it opened he stood with downcast eyes, the

injured side of his face being towards the door. He fancied he heard a smothered exclamation ; but Joan did not speak. She seemed to be about to shut the door, and then Jim looked at her with penitent eyes.

"I've come to ask your forgiveness, Joan."

She drew back, removing her hand from the door. She was gazing on his dreadful disfigurement, and already he told himself that Nicholas had lost his shilling. For pity was in Joan's eyes : the pity that had had a long and austere schooling, and was not born suddenly for this man at the sight of his wounds. And Anscorn felt that he could no more have spoken coarsely to her than he could have defamed the memory of his mother. Yet he knew he could only step into the house through hypocrisy.

"I'm easily done up. I've not got over the shock of my accident yet."

"How was it——" Her voice broke on her first words to him.

There was no invitation ; but Jim went in, shutting the door behind him.

"I'm rather tired."

He took a chair, and humbly put his hat on the floor. His subdued manner was not wholly make-believe. The winning of Nicholas' shilling was not so jocular an affair as he had imagined it would be. He and Joan were in the same room—but that was all.

"I've had hard times, Joan."

"Please do not call me Joan."

She remained standing : Jim somehow felt he ought

not to be seated. A slight colour was now in her face.

He began to tell her of his injury.

"I don't wish to know," she interrupted, not unkindly. She turned from him. "You must not stay here. What are you doing for a living?"

"Oh, anything; I'm a regular wanderer. I've been sleeping at the Coach and Horses."

"Yes, I know! Everyone speaks of it. Why did you come back?"

"I wanted to see you again to——"

"Please do not say anything of that sort!"

"But you believe me?"

"I am sorry to say I do not believe you! You should not have come here. You should not have returned. . . . I am trying to avoid every bitter word!—" She opened the door. "I had thought I could endure even *your* presence with composure. But I cannot—I cannot bear to be where you are! I have only allowed you to come in from pity; and I must ask you at once to go away."

"But Martin can't be jealous. He asked me on the night of the club supper to come home with him."

"I should have left the house had you entered it! I am glad you did not. It makes me think better of you."

"Oh—well—of course I wouldn't have done as Martin wanted, even if Zeekel Draicot hadn't carried on in that insane way."

Joan looked at him, her eyes full of eager questioning.

"I seem to be giving you credit for too much con-

sideration of me. Was it Mr Draicot who kept you away that night?"

"Oh, well——" Jim hesitated.

"I wish to know!" Joan said firmly.

"I can't say he kept me away. My leg got injured, and he took care of me."

"Where did you go with him?"

"To his sister's house; but she turned us both out—it was very late——"

"Where then did you go?"

"To Parum wood. I slept on leaves; and Zeekel—I can't say exactly how he managed. He was standing by a wall at my head when I woke. Hasn't he told you?"

Joan made no answer; a great stillness had fallen upon her. She crossed to the inner door.

"I must again remind you that you are in my house against my wish."

She went into the room, and shut herself in till she heard Anscomb go out. She then returned to the living room, and hurriedly locked the outer door.

Very soon all Harpsfield knew of Anscomb's visit to Joan's house. Miss Treeves and her mother were discussing the "incredible occurrence" when Joan went in about some trifle of domestic management. The Draicot family picture of the bad place, which Zeekel had given to Miss Treeves as a token of his gratitude for her kindness, was hung in the place of honour over the mantel-shelf, the top of the frame being draped with pale blue muslin and bows of crimson ribbon, to match the adornment of Miss Treeves' curls. Miss Treeves

was putting in the sleeve of a new dress, a garment of flaring magenta. She had been an agitated woman ever since the Squire had made her blush.

"I am totally at a loss to understand," she began, almost before Joan had entered, "how you could have allowed that man to cross your threshold."

"It is not quite fair to me—to suppose that I invited him in——"

"You should have thrown something at him! In your heart you must loathe the very ground the ugly wretch walks upon. But perhaps you don't think him so ugly after all!"

"Janet!——"

"Miss Treeves, if you please!"

Mrs Treeves sought to be peacemaker. "Poor Janet is that up to her ears in work, and this is the third time she's had back Nora Clayton's new dress to alter."

Miss Treeves worked with tremendous energy. "I trust we shall not cease to be friends, Mrs Potten."

"I hope not, indeed," Joan said frankly.

"Mother will always be pleased to do anything to help you—but I have a professional position to maintain; and although I treat ignorant people with contempt, yet one owes a duty to one's own self-esteem."

"Pray don't lower your self-esteem on my account, Miss Treeves," Joan said with spirit.

"I don't intend to!" The magenta sleeve flew over Miss Treeves' shoulder like a rag in a gale. "I may inform you that mother thinks Mr Draicot is as often in your house as he ought to be. It was I who persuaded Mr Burward to apportion him the vacant rooms

in the almshouse. And he has never been here since except to take away his box ! ”

“ But he so recently,” Joan gently urged, “ removed it from your house. I do know,” she added, “ that he is grateful to you, Miss Treeves, for your kindness to him.”

“ There’s his heirloom picture to go by,” said Mrs Treeves.

“ He brought you flowers to-day,” said Miss Treeves.

“ He didn’t come in,” Joan explained.

“ No ; I heard you open the window. I have reluctantly come to the conclusion, Mrs Potten, that you are not *quite* so ingenuous as I had imagined.”

“ Oh, don’t let us quarrel,” said Joan with emotion. “ I do value your friendship, and I should be very sorry if you were to turn against me.”

“ She won’t, my dear,” said Mrs Treeves ; and, when Joan was gone : “ Gracious me, Janet, you’d no call to upbraid her so, bringing in my name too. Whenever did I say that about her and Zeekel ? ”

“ Sh,” Miss Treeves whispered, “ there’s a man’s step.”

“ Not heavy enough for Zeekel,” said her mother.

“ Peep out and see who it is—quick ! ”

Mrs Treeves cautiously drew aside the window blind. “ It’s Nicholas. He’s gone into her house.”

“ She has the art to attract the men,” said Miss Treeves. “ And after all I’ve done for that woman ! ”

But Nicholas, at best, was only a boy-man ; and this evening he was sunk in a self-accusing abasement.

"I never thought, till I was at work in the gardens, what an insult it was to make a bet on you, Mrs Potten."

"Don't bother about it, Nicholas; I am sure you acted with no intentional disrespect to me. But I think," Joan added, smiling, "you deserved to lose your shilling."

"I don't believe I could have took his two," said the boy, "if I'd won them."

"There, we won't talk any more about it. How are you getting on at home, now your brother has left?"

"I do miss him, Mrs Potten. It's not the same since Effie turned him out. Zeekel's the one to make you feel like a man. I do believe I'll be drunk on Saturday night, Mrs Potten."

"No, no, Nicholas; that would be such a poor way, you know, to show people that your brother had made a man of you. Now promise me——" She held out her hand, suppressing a smile at the shy way the lad held it. "Promise you will keep from the drink on Saturday night."

"I'll not touch it this week, Mrs Potten."

"Ah, I know you will keep your word. Remember you were holding my hand when you said it, and a promise so given is binding on your honour—as much as a wager of a shilling—isn't it, now?"

"Mrs Potten," said Nicholas, shamefacedly, "I do wish you was Effie."

He met Zeekel in Dripping-pan lane, and told him he had been apologising to Mrs Potten.

"She's forgive me, Zeekel."

"I heard it from Roger. I donno but what I ought to box your ears."

"I'll break Roger's neck for tellin' you," said Nicholas.

"You'll not meddle with his neck nor his nose neither. How," said Zeekel, severely, "could it be kept secret—a thing like that about a woman? If you'd the sense of a rabbit you'd take no part in draggin' her name in the mire."

"But she's forgive me, Zeekel."

"Ay, she would, and that's the stronger reason to guard her from evil schemes. Where a woman's ready to forgive wrong it's the work of devils to do it to her."

"Zeekel, you're worse than Mrs Potten was against me."

"Well, well, I suppose it was only Jim's fun. I'll have to put a stopper on him for it."

"How do you like bein' the Squire's lodger, Zeekel?"

"Oh, well enough. It's a grand place, with accommodation for a gentleman of fine tastes. Why, I've got a washin'-sink all to myself, and there's a big lookin'-glass where I can shave my whole face all at once like a real barber. I've just been at it." He drew his hand across his cheek. "Soft and smooth as yours, Nicholas, with all that special scented soap."

"I've never had a shave yet, Zeekel. If I come and see you, will you give me one?"

"To be sure, if the razor's stout enough for such a tough job."

"I'll come on Saturday night."

"Oh, come before."

"But I want to be with you on Saturday night."

"Come then, lad, and welcome. I've an easy-chair that licks Effie's hollow for parlour luxury. I donno whether it will tempt me to laziness."

CHAPTER X

ZEEKEL left his brother, and on passing Miss Treeves' house he wondered if she would be offended were he to call at that hour, so far was he from suspecting the reawakening of hope long deferred in Miss Treeves' breast. "She's kind, for all her lofty words, but dreadful partic'ler in her manners," he said to himself; so he decided not to go in, and went on to the next door.

"You've had a look in from Nicholas, so I hear," he said to Joan, who was knitting one of the thick wool socks which Martin wore winter and summer.

"Yes; he has quite lately gone away. He told you?"

"Roger Coe did first. 'Twas on his mind, almost as shameful as Nicholas's, and he crept up to me in the gardens not to let the others hear."

"It is all over the village, I suppose."

"Ay," said Zeekel, "a thing they'd talk about, that."

"Miss Treeves is very— Were you surprised, Zeekel?"

"In a way, yes; in another way, no. You to speak to him—I've been thinkin' of it like a thing not to be understood ordinary. It's made me consider how easy folks are affrighted by a deed above them."

"Oh, but I didn't so regard it at all, Zeekel."

"No, or you'd not have done it. Moreover, he's the master of serpent dodges. But he'll have to reckon with me now, and I'm a harder nut to crack, with nothin' much for his comfort in the kernel when he gets there—if he ever does."

"What," Joan asked anxiously, "are you going to do?"

"For that, I'm not clear yet. I've had on my thinkin'-cap about it, how to put a spoke in his wheel, since Roger told me, and it's not as simple as it might seem. But I'll deal with him soon or late."

"I don't wish you to do anything, Zeekel."

"But he might molest you again."

"I shall ask Martin to tell him to keep away from the house."

Zeekel was seated behind her. "The light don't reach your lap, Joan. Can you see your knittin' there?"

"Oh, yes; I can knit in the dark."

She worked on in silence. Someone could be heard stirring the fire in the next house. All else was still and profound.

"Joan, it puts me beyond myself with rage the thought of that man to be in the same room where you are. It's like that splash of mud I washed off the arums this mornin'. And if you should ask Martin to forbid him—would he do it?"

"I shall ask him, at any rate. There are some things to which a woman cannot submit."

"You've had them in plenty, Joan. Then you—didn't tell him to come in?"

"I did not shut the door upon him when I saw him

there. He entered without being invited. If Martin should allow him to come here I shall leave the house till he is gone."

Zeekel considered this thing. "I'd be obliged, Joan, if you'd put off speakin' to Martin for a day or two. Mebbe you might wait to see me again before askin' him. I'll try to deal with the rascal to-night. If I could get a private word with him that might settle it, and save you riskin' fresh trouble with Martin. It's a man's work—to put a stop on him—and I'd be that pleased——"

"There must be no violence, Zeekel."

"No, no, not to begin with."

"Oh, not at all!" Joan said.

"Well, if he'll pay heed to my warnin', I donno——"

"Oh, there must be no violence, Zeekel!" Joan half turned her head to him and stopped knitting.

"I'll only persuade him then," said Draicot. "But I doubt, where there's brute force at work, how you can meet it except in its own kind. You'd not want me to deceive you, Joan, so if he's to be stopped comin' near you only in the fashion when reason's ended, I'll do it. If it was my house where you lived, I'd break him in pieces on the doorstep! I dursn't go behind your back to pretend the contrary."

"I think he may be sorry he came," said Joan.

She did not see Zeekel's smile. "I'll not say if his repentance is deep enough to last till he's a year older."

"We must trust in God," said Joan in a broken voice.

"Ay, but you've been trustin' in Him for such a

long while, Joan, and God is that terrible slow sometimes."

"You have said that before, Zeekel. I wish you would not say it. Somehow—of late—I have thought of it myself, and—it so unsettles me."

He could not see her hands, but he heard her needles at work. A piece of burnt wood fell from the grate; Zeekel drew his chair nearer to Joan's.

"If it grieves you, me to say He's slow, I'll not say it again. I'd not think it, mebbe, if I had your pure eyes. But He do keep mysterious and quiet when it suits Him to. Then there's no plainness, nor guidance, only our own course, and that's not always accordin' to the patience and long-sufferin' you believe in, Joan."

"I cannot doubt—I cannot doubt!" she said. "All would be at an end with me if I did."

"Truly it's wonderful," said Zeekel, "how them that look at it like you have to suffer from the evil of them that don't. My breast can't take it in for clear proof one way or another, except every now and then I'm tore in a marvel how you endure and keep your face in a shine of gladness often." He pondered a moment.

It seems to me sometimes there's no power beyond our own to help——"

"Oh, there is, Zeekel; I should not be here to-night if it were not so."

"The Church married you," said Draicot, "and the Church looks on. That's another deep mystery, and I had thoughts of it that night in Parum wood——" He paused: asked himself, Did she know? "That was when Effie locked her door on me," he went on.

"She never liked me after my uncivil treatment of her notice."

Another piece of red-glowing fuel fell from the fire.

"Zeekel."

"Yes, Joan."

"Why did you go to the wood that night?"

"Oh, that was Effie's temper."

"It was the night," said Joan, "that he came back."

"Ay—the night Effie turned me out."

"I know why you did it. He told me."

"Not much," said Zeekel, "for him to brag about. I doubt not he had a purpose in tellin' you. He's kept it to himself; I gave him a hint he'd be wise to; even Martin don't know."

"I don't think he meant to tell me. When he did, I felt how impossible it was for me to let him remain a minute longer. How good you are to me, Zeekel."

"It was no hardship, Joan. I never heeded the cold, nor grew sleepy. But I don't see the daffodils I fetched you."

"You must not bring me any more flowers," said Joan. "I wish you would take a few to Miss Treeves now and then. Their snowdrops have not come up very well this season, and she says Sally Catmer trod down her wallflowers one night."

"I'll fetch her some."

"Yes, to-morrow, if you think of it; Miss Treeves has been kind to you—and to me."

Zeekel had risen: he was still behind her chair.

"How long, Joan, is it to be? It'll soon now be another summer come—and I'm that oppressed in my breast—like a chokin' as if I was a dishonour to

myself and yet couldn't get out of it except through worse——"

"Don't forget who I am, Zeekel."

"Oh, but if I could take you up in my arms——"

Her needles did not cease, but there was a trembling upon her hands.

"You will feel quite comfortable and contented——presently—in your new lodgings," she said.

"But it's not that, Joan." He was bending over her. "It's you, Joan. I donno how—I never set myself to do it—not as if I—but you've got inside my heart, and I can't let you go. If—if only I was to kiss you, Joan——"

"Oh don't tempt me," she said. "Don't, don't——" She was quivering in every fibre. "You can't understand how bad I am, Zeekel!"

"No, no, Joan, it's me that's bad—you donno how bad, and ever since that man came back I've been in defiance of everybody but the care of you. Always I'm askin' myself what can I do for you—how to mend it. I want to stand between you and them that persecute you, but you won't let me." He stooped lower; she felt his breath, with its torrent of passion on her face. "I've such a great hunger on me for you, Joan. I'm almost as if I could absorb you in myself, to take you for ever from them." His cheek touched her ear; she did not move, yet seemed to shrink where she sat. "Such a hunger, Joan," he whispered, his passion encompassing her like an atmosphere. "Every minute you're with me . . . like as if I breathed you in with every breath, or could call you to me when I'm miles apart from where you are . . .

Day an' night the same ; I can't help it now, though I might have done when it began. I did fight hard with myself once to keep you in the patience and silence where you want to be. I don't struggle with it no more now, and I donno if I ever will again, because to be alive is such a worthless thing without the thought of you." His cheek was on hers ; he held his hand on her arm to steady her shaking. "Joan, if I was to kiss you——"

"No, no, Zeekel !"

"Then I'll not. I'm that mean and selfish—like a leaf in the wind for weakness—but you needn't be frightened of me, Joan."

"I am afraid of myself, Zeekel."

"Then I've been a coward to forget ; and I've prided myself thinkin' I was different to you. . . . But your cheek is that soft, Joan." It seemed to him that the silence was an eternity of happiness and pain. "Like velvet, Joan, your cheek," he said in a whisper, and his burning sighs passed over her face. "O my God," he moaned, "you donno how bad I am. You'd not let my cheek be on yours if you was to know !"

"My love !" she said, and drew her hand over his hair and down his face. "O my love !" and her tears fell fast.

"It's my badness that's made you cry—I'll go away," said Zeekel. He stood up, and broadened his shoulders as a brave man may on going to his doom. "I've demeaned myself, and took advantage of your gentle sweetness toward me ; but mebbe it's for the best you should see what's in me. I'm sorry, yet it was to be." He took up his hat. "You're far better

than me, Joan, and I ask your pardon for showin' myself off in my true colours." He was at the door. "I'll bring some flowers for Miss Treeves, if you want me to. The Squire says anybody can help themselves to the daffodils, and they'll soon be over now." He opened the door, paused a moment on the threshold, then moved slowly away.

CHAPTER XI

ZEEKEL went round to the inn to see if he could get a quiet word with Anscomb. It was not yet eight o'clock. He did not enter; a couple of Great Horsted hawkers were there, making ribald hilarity among the villagers, and Martin Potten was apparently in a quarrelsome mood. Roger Coo was leaning against the wall in a dark passage playing his concertina. Zeekel went on to the almshouse.

He was at a loss how to deal with this man. His mind ran on force, but he could now understand that the conflict, from Joan's way of looking at it, was spiritual, or at least argumentative; and Zeekel was diffident about his powers of persuasion.

He walked round the almshouse. It was a one-storeyed stone building between the cluster of village houses and the wood. A huge, grotesquely-trimmed mass of boxwood at one end made it appear in the night larger than it was, while at the other end it was dwarfed by tall shrubs in the garden. The hollyhocks every summer grew as high as the eaves, and the two old women who lived there could lose themselves among sweet old-fashioned flowers. The almshouse had been built and endowed by the squire's grandmother, the Burward arms being cut in the arch of the doorway.

Zeekel only consented to occupy the two vacant

rooms on the understanding that he should pay as a lodger, and that he should at once vacate the rooms when they were needed for another friendless widow of the parish. He did not mind what people said; it was a pleasure to him to know that his being at the almshouse was a help to the old ladies, and they were glad to have "a man in the house."

It was past nine o'clock when Zeekel got back to the Coach and Horses; and now he found Jim Anscomb outside.

"Hullo, it's you, Jim; the very man I wanted to see."

"What about?"

"Oh, a subject that may lead to your good."

"Well, get it off your chest, old chap."

"It's private," said Zeekel, leading him away. They turned the corner of the tavern, and strolled up the road to the wood. No one was about. "I've not heard if you've found a job yet."

"I don't want one here. I'll have a fling in the old place while my cash lasts, and then I'm off. Well, was that what you had to say to me?"

Zeekel took his arm. "No, not exactly. I thought you might like to see my new lodgin's."

"Anything to drink up there?"

"Plenty to drink," said Zeekel.

"Got any cards? You are a droll old stick!"

"You see a lot of jokes now and then, Jim."

"Bless you," said the squalid philosopher, "it's all an infernal immense joke—life itself. I almost burst myself with laughter in the pub just now when Martin said I'd got to go home with him for supper."

I'm blest if I see the sense of it. He loves his wife and hates her in the same minute."

"Did you think of goin' home with him, Jim?"

"No—though it puts me in a wax, Joan to be so squeamish about it. Martin said he'd cart along Roger to be the military band at our banquet."

"He was set on it, I gather," said Zeekel.

"Hotter than that night of the club feast—Oh, damn, Zeekel, you're hurting my arm."

"It's not easy to see at this part of the road," Zeekel apologised.

"I'm not drunk, you know," said Jim. "I say, old man, if you were to take to the drink you'd be a lively customer to deal with—a worse demon than Martin. You've got it in you."

"What, Jim?"

"Why, the devil."

"Oh, for that," said Draicot, "he's the last man in the world I bother about."

Anscomb became confidential. "Look here, if I was you I'd draw it mild—or I should say more artful—with Joan. Martin's wider awake than you think, and if you two giants have a row, one of you will want a coffin."

"Fine sport, no doubt," said Zeekel.

"You fake about that house in such a blundering style," said Jim. "Of course a woman's not invulnerable even when she's up to her hairpins in religion; but it ought to be done sub-rosa—under the rose, you know."

"On the sly," said Zeekel.

"Yes ; but you really haven't the knack of managing a delicate affair of that sort."

"Come in and give me a wrinkle or two," said Draicot.

He opened the garden gate ; he still held Jim's arm.

"All in the dark !"

"Ay, the old folks go early to bed."

Zeekel never entered the almshouse by the door with the Burward arms over it ; he left this entirely to the two widows, so as to make them feel they were mistresses of the place, and he merely a guest for a while, with no wish to give himself airs. He took Jim round to the smaller door at the back, and having produced a formidable key, unlocked it, and told Jim to go in first. He followed, replaced the key in his pocket, said, "Don't make no noise," and bolted the door. They were in darkness, save for a faint shine half a dozen steps or so along the passage. This was the entrance to Zeekel's rooms, the door being partly open. They entered the sitting-room, from which access was had to the bedroom. Draicot turned up the lamp.

"I say, ain't you smart !"

"Ay, real high-class," said Zeekel.

"Carpet, easy-chair, pictures and swell tablecloth, steel fender and fire-irons, and a wool-worked stool, too, you gay old bachelor ! When the girls get to know about this aristocratic luxury they'll all be wanting to come and keep you company." Jim threw himself into the easy-chair. "Fits me like a glove—must be too small for you."

"No, I manage to cram into it somehow," said Zeekel.

"Where do you keep your whiskey?" Jim asked, looking round.

"I'll be obliged," said Zeekel, "if you'll get out of that chair." Jim stared at him. "I want it——" He gripped Jim by the arm, and the next moment that young man was on his feet looking rather foolish. "It's only for my special visitors on state occasions," Zeekel explained, "though I promised Nicholas a long sit on it for Saturday night. Here's chairs good enough for you and me."

Suspicion was in Jim's eyes; he recalled the night of subjection to Draicot's will in Parum wood. The almshouse was isolated; he could not escape. The old women would be asleep; they'd be of no use in any case; Zeekel had invented another little plot to keep him from Joan!—

"Well, you are a funny joker, old chap. But what about that drink?"

"Water," said Zeekel.

Anscomb seated himself: he had grown pale.

"You've tricked me into coming up here. What's your latest game?"

"If you're sensible," said Zeekel, "it needn't be as uncomfortable as the sleep on the withered leaves."

"I hope not!"

"I'll tell you candid, Jim, and put an end to your fright. I'm goin' to give you your last chance to behave like a man. It's not in you natural, so it's my business to fix it in, but I'll do it by peaceable means." He stood with his back to the fire; he was

not looking at Anscomb. "I want you to promise solemn not to go again to Martin Potten's house."

"Oh—that's all."

"No more," said Zeekel, "nor no less."

"Well, I must say you've gone a confounded round-about way to work!"

"Ay, that's my way, I'm thinkin'," said Zeekel. And now his strong gaze made Jim's heart quail. "Mebbe as well for you I'm not more direct. I've another fashion with such as you, Jim, but I'll try this first."

Anscomb stood up. "I'm not going to be threatened by you!" He was making a desperate effort to keep up his courage. "We're not a lot of bandits and cut-throats even in Harpsfield. This is a free country!"

"If you'll keep quiet," said Zeekel, "and stick to your chair, we'll make quicker headway." He waited: Jim sat down. "You say it's a free country; so there's plenty of room in it for a man to swing his arm. I've said I want to be peaceable—but if I'm forced to swing mine you'll feel it."

"I'll not be bullied!" Jim exclaimed; but his voice and manner confessed Zeekel's mastery.

"I'm for reasonin' agreeable upon it," said Draicot. "I'm no match for you in tongue, but I know what I'm after. You'll have to promise, and if you break it then I'll deal with you effectual."

"She's put you up to this!"

Again Zeekel's eyes searched the poltroon through and through. "If you leave her out you'll be safer where you are."

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"Upon my soul," Jim began, but his spirit fainted on the words.

"Your soul," said Zeekel, as if speaking to himself.

He glanced across the room at the Draicot family Bible, which Effie had placed on his box when it was carried into the garden. He went over to the side table, and bringing the book, put it on Jim's knees.

"That's the most solemn thing you believe in. Sit where you are! If it don't give the proof of that thing you call your soul I donno what else could."

Zeekel drew a chair close to Jim's, and seated himself.

"This book's precious to me because my father read in it, and my mother lived by it, knowin' it from heart almost. But I'll not say it's the same to me, Jim, what it is to you in the believin' way—but it's not me, but you, that's to take the vow, though I'll watch there's swift punishment if it's broke. Keep your knees steady, man; I'm not goin' to touch you." Zeekel opened the book. "I donno what the place there may be."

"Matthew," said Jim.

"That'll do as well's another," said Zeekel. "Now, Jim, set your hand on the page."

"What for?——"

"Both of them," said Zeekel. "I'm not sure but what you should go down on your knees, but we'll go through it you sittin', for fear of damage to the book. Now say after me. 'I swear on this ancient family Bible——'" Jim began to laugh. "You'd best be serious over it," Zeekel told him sternly. "Say after me."

"All right, old chap ; I'll say anything you like. 'I swear by this ancient family Bible——'"

"'Which I do believe my Maker writ ——'"

"'Which I believe my Maker wrote——'"

"Ay, you're welcome to improve my grammar," Draicot said, "I'll stick to the sense. Now I come to the point—'Never to enter Martin Potten's door again, no, not if he should drag me to it——'"

"That's a bit thick, you know," said Jim. "If he was to drag me to it how could I help myself?"

"I want to hold you responsible, however it may happen. I'll not have none of your accidents nor compulsions ; I'm not goin' to leave you a loophole for escape. I'm up to your foxy tricks. Come—say the words ; and ponder on it where your hands are."

"I'm hanged if I remember them."

Zeekel repeated the oath from the beginning, and Jim parroted it after him. Zeekel put back the book. He kept Jim in the almshouse till past closing time at the Coach and Horses.

CHAPTER XII

MARTIN POTTEN behaved riotously at the inn because the landlord could not tell him what had become of Jim Ancomb. He said, "I'll be even with Jim for this," and went out in a very black temper. He grew more amiable on catching sight of Sally Catmer. He kissed her, and she slapped his face. He caught hold of her, saying, "You're going to have supper with me; Roger will take care of you," and made her go with him to his house. She was for running away, but Martin pushed her into the living room, and bundled Roger in after her.

"He made me come, Mrs Potten!" Sally cried out. "I won't stop—let me out! She's in bed."

"Joan!" Potten shouted.

"Don't listen to him!" Sally called. She turned angrily to Roger. "You to come to a married woman's house at this time of night!"

"Joan!" Martin roared.

She did not answer. He was on guard at the outer door lest Sally should escape. He secured it, and went to the bedroom door.

"Joan!——"

The room was in darkness. He was going in when Sally seized his arm.

"You mad bull! if you dare to strike her I'll scream 'zf it was me!" She pulled him back.

"Speak to him, Mrs Potten — only to keep him quiet."

Again the man thundered his wife's name.

"Yes, Martin," she answered.

"You've found your tongue at last! You've got to get up!"

This was too much for Sally: she gave Martin a savage blow. "Don't do what he tells you, Mrs Potten; he's not fit to have a home of his own." She made another attack on Potten. "Men like you ought to live in barracks and sleep in a padded cell! Oh, Mrs Potten, I didn't want to offend you." She dragged Martin out of the bedroom. Roger, trying to turn up the lamp, got the wick wrong, and Martin, swearing at him, went to put it right; and then Sally, seeing the key was on the outside of the bedroom door, swiftly pulled it to, locked it, and pushed the key under.

"What did you do that for?" Martin asked.

"To keep you out!"

"As if that would. Let me in, Joan."

"Don't—don't, Mrs Potten!"

Martin waited a moment; then he put his shoulder to the door and burst it open.

"Oh you big brute of a beast!" Sally cried.

He went in; Sally snatched up Roger's concertina and made for the outer door. It was only bolted, and she soon had it open. She told Roger that if he didn't come away at once she would throw his concertina into the pond. Roger, in a panic, hurried after her. But Martin dashed out into the lane, caught Sally and took the instrument from her.

"Now I'll have another kiss for it."

She abused him, struggled, tried to bite and scratch him; but he had his way with her for all that. And then he let her go, and made Roger return with him to the house.

They sat by the fire; Joan did not appear. Martin fell in a morose mood. Roger kept glancing timorously at the open bedroom door. Had Martin struck her in bed? To Roger this was a fearful thought. But perhaps he hadn't—it would only be Sally's screams.

"Martin—I wonder if you—if you wonder whether I want to go home."

"You'll go when I'm finished with you. You've got to help me catch a sparrow at the hayricks for the ferret. I promised him a treat to-night."

"But Sally might lock me out."

"Then kick open the door. You're done for among women," said Potten, "if you don't show them you're master." His shoulders slouched forward; Roger, gazing on his hero, thought what a splendid man Martin looked in the firelight. "Those women have been my ruin, Roger."

And then Roger said this strange thing out of his simplicity: "Why don't you leave them alone then?"

"You are a fool," said Martin, and sighed.

The two sat in silence; Roger could not keep his eyes off the broken inner door.

"Martin," at last he said shiveringly—"did you hit her?"

"What's that to you if I did?"

Roger drew a long breath. "Oh, I was only

wonderin'. She's always been that kind to me, as if she was my own sister."

"Dry up about that!"

Another silence in the living room; and silence deeper still, it seemed to Roger, in the bedroom. He hoped Mrs Potten had heard him say she'd been kind to him.

"Shall I give you a tune, Martin?"

"Yes—let's have some more of these 'pleasures and palaces.'" But no sooner had the musician begun than—"Great God Almighty," Martin shouted, "shut up!" He knocked the concertina out of Roger's hands. "Leave it on the floor—we'll go sparrow-hunting."

He got a lantern, and lighted it. They left the house by the back door.

The half-moon had a star over it, and the top of the throne of "that starred Ethiop queen" was visible amid reposeful clouds; but the earth clasped a deep darkness to its bosom.

"Just the sort of night to catch them," said Martin, leading with the lantern. When they were come to Farmer Windeat's, he hid the light under his coat, and whispered to the boy: "If you turn tail because you hear a bark!——"

"No, no, Martin, not with you."

But they got into the farmyard without surprising the dogs or the poultry.

"When I was a youngster," said Potten, "I used to get out of the window before daybreak and come here and hunt for hen's eggs."

"Did you ever find any?" Roger asked.

"Lots."

"What did you do with them, Martin?"

"Gave some to my mother, to stop her from sending me to Great Horsted for a sheep's head because they sold them a penny cheaper than at Thakeam. I sold the others to buy tobacco and send valentines to the girls. You are a dolt, Roger; you'll never be alive till you pick up a sweetheart. I had them long before I was your age."

"I do believe," said Roger, "I didn't ought ever to marry. Your father was a sailor, wasn't he, Martin?"

"He went to sea. Shut up."

They were close to the hayricks; Martin picked out one the eaves of which he could reach with his hands.

"Are the birds up there?" Roger asked.

"You keep quiet!" He scratched the hay. "I see them." He held up the lantern, and ran its light across the eaves.

"They'll fly out!" said Roger.

"No, they won't; they're dazed by the light."

He gave the boy the lantern, and, standing with his breast to the rick, put up his hands. A bird flew out; something fluttered faintly.

"Have you got one, Martin?"

"Yes, but it's been starved—too skinny." He broke its neck with his finger and thumb, and threw it away. Again he put up his hands, stretching himself on tiptoe; and again there was a feeble fluttering. "This one'll do; nice and fat." He killed it, and thrust it in his pocket.

"I do believe," said Roger admiringly, "you could catch another."

"Easy. But one's enough for his supper, and he likes them fresh. Give me the lantern."

They returned to the house; and Martin, sitting before the fire, plucked the sparrow clean, letting the feathers fall inside the fender. Then he broke all the bird's bones.

"Crack, crack," he said, looking at Roger.

"What for do you break its bones?"

"Because they might choke him. Why shouldn't he have his supper dressed in proper style?"

They went into the scullery, and Martin lifted the lid of the box. The ferret stood up on its hind legs, and its master, making a ring of his finger and thumb round its neck, pulled it out and let it crawl up his breast. Roger gazed open-mouthed on the long white creature, fascinated by its sinewy strength and relentless purpose; the beautiful undulations of its body were horrible to him; the dead-luminous pink of its eyes, peering through Martin's beard, suggested incredible, illimitable evil to his imagination.

"You can't be sure," he gasped, "if he's lookin' at you or not. Do he like to be kept in the dark?"

"Of course he does. How do you suppose he'd live, you fool?"

Martin, having stirred the straw, and taken out an empty saucer, stroked the ferret affectionately, and then, on a sudden, glaring horribly at Roger, put its head in his mouth. Roger uttered a shriek, and Potten called him a name.

"As if I'm frightened of him! I dug him out of a

warren once, and there he was, seven rabbits killed, him on top of them, fast asleep, gorged with blood."

"Seven rabbits?"

"Don't you believe me? I counted them."

"Didn't you take them, Martin?"

"Of course I did. He'd have ended seventeen the temper he was in. No ferret his equal for pluck hereabouts. He's a regular Don Juan among rabbits. But you oughtn't to kill 'em, you rascal; you've got to be muzzled for rabbiting now." He unbuttoned his waistcoat, and let the animal creep in, covering it up to keep it warm. "That's another of his special treats. Aha—out you come; he's hunting for the sparrow."

"Oh, if he was to bite you!"

"I'd crush him flat's a pancake in two twos. He knows by now who he's got to deal with. Look at his lovely eyes; like a young pink snake coming to life." He let the ferret down into the box, and dropped in the naked sparrow. "You'll not see a scrap of it left in the morning."

"My, when I'm a man full-out," said Roger, "I'll keep a ferret like you."

"Now be off home. I'll let you out this way, in case you should make a row and wake——" He thrust Roger from the scullery. "Pick up your concertina."

"Good-night, Martin," and the worshipper crept reverentially from the presence of his idol.

CHAPTER XIII

POTTEN did not sleep in his bed that night. The fire was not gone out, and he replenished it, and sat smoking till past midnight. The strong tobacco fumes got into the bedroom, and he heard his wife's smothered cough, the bedclothes held to her mouth.

"She's trying to hide it from me," he thought, "because of her pride." A little child might have told him that what he called pride in her was the love of peace.

Her voice came softly from the inner room.

"Aren't you coming to bed, Martin?"

He did not answer. He made a noise with his feet to let her know he had heard. He had a notion that his silence would vex her. She was often silent when he went on at her; and women needed to be paid out in their own coin.

But he listened eagerly. She did not call again, and he said to himself, "That's how she shows her contempt for me." He shook the ash from his pipe, and bent down to unlace his boots. He unlaced one, and then laced it up again.

He had been seized once more with the desire—a desire which had frequently possessed him of late—to speak to her in the dark. He felt sure of his power over her then—when he could not see her face, when she could not see his. He experienced at such times

an adequate masculine elation of spirit, a sense of being paramount even should he be tempted to be pitiful and weak. It was when she lifted her eyes to his, under his cruelty, that he raged in a compelling conviction of his own inferiority. He was maddened by the idea that his wife was better than he. She was a woman; and everybody knew what she had been. She was not that now, he knew; and never could be again. But he could not follow her to the place where miracle begins.

He took no light with him into the bedroom; and had a candle been lighted there, he would have blown it out. He could discern indistinctly the line of her body; but her face was in deep shadow. A bright star, poised at the window, faintly illumined the room; Joan had for long been gazing at it.

Martin sat on the edge of the bed, at her feet.

"You're awake," he said.

"Yes," she answered. "It is time you came to bed, Martin, or you'll get very little rest."

"You've been awake since Sally Catmer was here."

"Yes. I heard you go out with Roger, and return."

"We went poaching;" he tried to give a criminal significance to the words.

"It was only to catch birds for your ferret. Did you frighten Roger with it? I heard him scream."

"He wanted to play some more of those 'pleasures and palaces';" Potten laughed—"to cheer you up," he added.

"He is very much attached to you," said Joan.

"Do take off your clothes, Martin. You know your chest is always worse when you don't have a good night's sleep."

He sank on his elbow towards her. "You say that because you think it's your duty to."

"You should not," she replied gently, "taunt one for doing one's duty."

"Oh, I can see through a brick wall," he said.

She forced herself to a little piece of humour.

"But isn't there sometimes another one on the other side of it?"

"You think I can't understand you!" he cried bitterly. "You made me break open the door!"

"Oh, no—you didn't give me time to get up and let you in. I don't suppose," Joan said after a pause, "that such an act will give you any satisfaction when you think of it calmly. I am sure, if it is spoken of, it won't raise you in anyone's esteem."

"I don't care what people say of me!" He strained to see her face, as he always did after he had planned not to see it. "Have you forgotten I brought Sally in?"

"No, that is a thing one can't easily forget."

"But you've made up your mind not to complain about it!"

"My complaints of your conduct have not hitherto been of much avail."

His peculiar laugh was followed by—"So now you give me up as one of the damned!"

"No, no," Joan answered earnestly, "I shall never do that! But if I don't complain—that is no reason why you should think I have no cause to. Nor

should it lead you to conclude that you have done anything creditable."

She did not often speak to him like this. It seemed to attract him to her; he drew nearer—"If I were to bring in Zeekel Draicot when you're in bed you'd not refuse to get up."

"I think," said Joan, gazing at the star, "he would refuse to come in."

Martin's shoulders heaved. He suddenly sat up straight, as though a recumbent position choked him. "So he's a 'gentleman'—like those others!" He looked at her sideways: she made no reply. "But you can't get any silks and satins out of Zeekel!" He waited for the sneer to do its work; but still she did not answer. "I don't say it's Zeekel—but there's somebody else you love," he cried. "You'll never meet him again—whoever he is—but you can't get away from him!"

"Now don't be so unkind, Martin. You can be generous, I know, and you do yourself such an injustice to talk in this way. It is cruel—cruel to me and dishonouring to yourself; because, you know, dear, when you married me you took me with all my faults. And I—I took you with all yours."

"You knew my character!"

"And I made no concealment of mine, Martin."

"You didn't tell me much!"

"No—my doing so would have served no good purpose. But I told you enough—before I became your wife."

"You only said you'd been like Mary Magdalen before she met Christ."

Out of a great silence came her great justification :
"That was enough for our Lord."

Her husband bowed his head.

"Joan, Joan, if only I could make it out as you do!"

"You can, Martin, if you will try to. Ah, it can't be harder for you than it was for me!"

He stepped into the middle of the room. "I'll tell you something about myself one of these days." He moved to the door. "I would now, but you hate me!"

"No, no!"

He sat on the edge of the bed again, and peered at her intently. "You'd not bother, whatever it was——"

"Yes, I should," she said.

"Then I'll tell you." He listened to her breathing, angered that it was a thing not under his own control. "I wanted to bring Jim Anscomb home to-night." Once more he listened; and now it seemed to him that she had ceased to breathe. "He promised—I made him promise to come. But he disappeared before closing time. If I thought Zeekel!—" Then in an intense whisper: "Has Zeekel been here?"

"Yes."

"Did he say anything about carrying off Jim from the Coach and Horses?"

"No."

"Well!—I'll get it out of Jim."

He returned to the living room. He was very still for half an hour or so. Then Joan went out to him,

and tried to coax him to bed. The fire was almost black, and the lamp was going out. After his refusal, Joan sat beside him.

"Martin—why should you wish to bring that man to this house?"

He would not look at her.

"Because I—I'll please myself about it!"

"Then I must tell you," said Joan, "that if you bring him here—I shall not remain where he is."

"We'll see about that!" Nevertheless he admired her spirit. His desire to humiliate her was not that she should be broken down personally, but rather that he should produce some effect upon her to lessen his own feeling of incomprehensible moral unworthiness. "He's been to see you already!" He just glanced at her as he said this.

"Yes," Joan said; "and now, as you have heard of his coming——"

"But not from you!"

"No. I considered whether I should tell you, and I thought it would be for the best not to do so. It seemed to me that, as my husband, you might make a greater scandal in the village by inflicting chastisement on the man who would so insult me."

This brought a gush of tenderness in Martin's heart.

"Joan, I don't want you to say what you'd do—that sort of threat—but I'm glad he went away to-night."

"What I said, Martin, was not a threat."

"No—you wouldn't do it."

He clasped his hand over hers. She did not

return the caress. She was past make-believe ; and it was just her make-believe for which he craved, any abandoned display of devotion that would make less vivid his own shortcomings. But she sat motionless ; and he withdrew his hand. Together they gazed upon the dull glow in the grate.

She reminded him again that he would be tired in the morning if he did not get sufficient rest.

"You don't want me," he said gloomily. "They say you're my wife, but they don't know how sometimes I can't believe it myself! You bear my name, but you don't belong to me! I'm the worst mistake you've made—that's what you're always saying to yourself, even when you try not to think of it." He stood up. "You can't hide it from me!" He kept moving restlessly, but did not go from the hearth ; he stared at the window, then over Joan's head at the case of stuffed creatures ; then came the nervous explosion—"If you don't want me then I don't—I can do without you! You're always making me feel degraded! You did it before Sally and Roger. You do it before everybody. And now you dictate who I've to bring into the house!"

"I don't dictate, Martin. You must know how unjust it is for you to say that. But I do appeal to you not to let that man come here—and surely I am not going beyond my right."

"He's no stranger to you!"

She sat very still. It was the wound of wounds, and she was dumb under its pain. But all that was most womanly in her revolted against the outrage.

"It's the way you put it," Potten went on, "as if you were saying to yourself he'd contaminate you with his presence."

Joan rose, and faced him.

"And so," she said—"so he would!"

Her husband's gaze wandered about the room. He was struggling to rouse himself from her influence. In the same moment it awed and enraged him; he was like a man suffocating.

"Go to bed!" he cried—"Go to bed!"

But she stood before him.

"You sometimes make all that has become good in me turn back to all that was bad. You sometimes make me feel as though all my striving were in vain. Oh," she pleaded, "if only you would accept me as I am, and forget what I have been—that would be nobler in you, Martin, and I think you owe it to your manhood, and in common fairness to me."

"Go to bed!" he said; and as she turned from him—"I can't make it out, Joan," he added, "how it is you make me feel utterly wrong in everything, somehow." He touched there the core of his wretchedness, and it dismayed him, as though he were on the point of an absolute surrender of his whole conception of masculine prerogative. He turned from her. "I'm not going to sleep with you to-night."

She went into the bedroom, thinking he would presently change his mind. She lay listening to his movements: heard him take off his boots and throw them inside the fender; then he put out the lamp, and all was still in the house. The star at the window seemed very far away now.

When two o'clock struck, Joan got out of bed and crept to the door.

"Martin—are you there?"

He did not reply. She lighted a candle, and went into the living room. He was lying on the hearth, in his clothes, asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

ON a Sunday in mid April, a day that seemed to gather up and express the genius of Spring, the Rector fell ill, and there was no morning service in the church. The rectory brougham was sent to Great Horsted, the coachman (in fawn-coloured livery and cockade) bearing a note for the vicar of the county town; and on the return of the carriage to Harpsfield it contained a young clergyman who had come to take the evening service, which was held in the hour before sunset, owing to there being no gas, and Mrs Mewett objecting to the smell of oil.

The visitor wore a long cloak and a shovel hat. He had a Lenten face, and an atmosphere of purity so brilliant that it suggested the possibility of violent and appalling relapse. But although his countenance was ascetic it shone with happiness.

It was within ten minutes of the time of the service, and villagers were assembling in the churchyard. They stood back deferentially from the path as the unknown clergyman advanced. They were puzzled what to think of him: he was unlike the old rector, and so very much unlike the new; and they wondered whether Mrs Mewett would approve of him.

The simple folk did not dream that Mrs Mewett's approval or disapproval were matters about which the young priest did not at all concern himself. His walk

was rapid, and curiously slovenly ; it seemed, indeed, as though he took a delight in rendering his personal appearance ungraceful. But he had the air of humble sincerity, the aroma of abstract love, the transfigured distinction of religious passion ; and these no bodily peculiarities can obscure. He nodded jerkily to right and left as he walked up among the people, saying, "How do you do? How do you do?" as though he had known them all his life and acknowledged himself one with them in the household of faith.

He touched a child's head, and smiled ; he perceived the divine sign in its forehead. The child stared vacantly into his face, as though he had been mesmerised. The women curtsied ; the men sheepishly doffed their Sunday hats ; Sally Catmer tittered, and immediately flattened her hand on her mouth to keep back her mirth till "him in the petticoats" had vanished into the church. But Sally never after made fun of this young minister.

The Rector's pains had abated by the afternoon, and Mrs Mewett was enthroned in a morocco-upholstered chair in the rectory drawing-room in readiness to leave when the bell should begin to ring. She felt it her duty to be present in order that there should be no misbehaviour at public worship in the Rector's absence. The bell ceased as she entered the church. She was three minutes late, but the sexton would not have dared to stop ringing until the great lady had arrived. He stopped to salute her, and that was the beginning of the service. It would scarcely have seemed incongruous had the congregation stood up and inclined humbly towards Mrs Mewett as she

sailed down the aisle in that stately high way of hers, all silks and jewels and scents, like a lady-patroness in a pauper assembly, with the Lord God Omnipotent waiting to welcome her. Some of the ingenuous villagers, indeed, wondered, as they watched the Rector's wife sink so gracefully on her knees in the uppermost seat in the synagogue, what there could possibly be for her to ask from Providence.

She rose, moved her eyes slightly round, this way and that, as though to emphasise the fact of her presence, and opened her beautiful padded seal and silver bound prayer-book on her lap. And then the young priest came in from the vestry.

Mrs Mewett disliked his appearance. He was not a cheerful-looking man ; no one could be whose face and figure suggested starvation. He did not look miserable, but she objected to subtle happiness. She said afterwards that his nose had an expression as though he were trying to poke it into the clouds. Also she mentally protested against his short surplice ; and that embroidered thing hanging from his gaunt shoulders had a disturbing effect upon her, because she did not know in the least what it meant. She grew red in the face when, pausing before the Communion table, he bowed to it, or, as Mrs Mewett said, "jerked his empty head at it." And, eyeing his every movement, the poor lady became redder still, and felt quite annoyed, when he knelt in the Rector's place and crossed himself. She determined not to invite him to the rectory. She suspected he was capable of hearing confessions.

He read the prayers with a familiarity of tone that

rather dismayed the older folk ; it was so much like talking to someone who was immediately there, not millions of miles away. The choir were so disorganised in their feelings that they gave the responses even more discordantly than usual, this adding to Mrs Mewett's vexation, as the man would be sure to go back to Great Horsted and joke about them. Martin Potten and Nicholas Draicot were in the choir. As the service went on, Martin grew more and more emotional ; and Nicholas completely lost his singing voice from nervousness.

Zeekel, who had not the fear of Mrs Mewett before his eyes, entered during the chanting of the Magnificat, and slipped into the first pew he came to, which happened to be just behind the one in which were Joan, Sally Catmer, and the publican's wife. They were under the little gallery. It was now only used for storing lumber, grave-digging tools, and other rubbish, Mrs Mewett having issued an edict against worshippers going up there because she had seen two young people making use of the gallery for surreptitious sweethearting purposes—as if that were the worst use to which churches are put !

Farmer Windeat and the Miss Windeats were in their crimson-cushioned place, and Andrew Catmer was before Joan, with Roger Coe, who never had the courage to sit in the same pew with Sally.

Miss Treeves had intended to be at the service, but seeing Mrs Potten pass the window "dressed," she remained at home with Zeekel's picture of the bad place. The Squire's great pew, in a kind of side chapel, to which there was a separate

entrance, with the Burward arms over it, was vacant.

None of the windows of Harpsfield church had stained glass, and when the strange clergyman stood up in the pulpit the glory of the setting sun poured in upon him. He gazed into the blaze of golden light during the singing of the hymn, and the child having the divine sign in his brow thought he was looking at angels ascending and descending. The expression in his face made Joan feel that she too could endure to the end; and Zeekel said to himself, "I donno if he thinks Him as slow as I do."

The sexton, remembering that Mrs Mewett had scolded him for letting the sun shine in upon the pulpit, went to pull down the blind, but the young priest said to him in quite a friendly voice, "No, no; please leave it as it is."

It may have been the reflection of sunset light that gave Mrs Mewett a complexion so extremely crimson. It was inexcusable! A stranger had no right to interfere with her arrangements, and make her look ridiculous in the eyes of these people.

But it was only during the sermon that the ecclesiastical feminine head of the village fully realised her impotence in the presence of this audacious and extraordinary man. He had removed his stole, and kissed it, on entering the pulpit. He again crossed himself on making the invocation.

"You will find my text in the second last chapter of St John's Gospel."

Mrs Mewett heard a few books being opened, but on no account would she have looked at hers. "The

second last chapter!" The man was plainly a vulgarian. He had, in truth, as presently appeared, small regard for the niceties of diction: men intensely in earnest seldom have: the impress of personality is the more wonderful when it reaches the heart by a commonplace avenue. He opened the Bible, and held his face close to the page.

"Then the disciples went away again unto their own home."

He glanced up.

"Now note what follows. I am not going to preach a long sermon, and I have nothing new to say. But I want you all to pay great attention to the next words I shall read out of this book, for they are the words of God, and therefore more important than all the sermons ever preached since the world began."

Again he bent his face to the page.

"But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping."

He shut the book. He had no notes. His next words made Mrs Mewett set her lips very tight.

"Now Mary Magdalen was a harlot."

Joan's heart seemed to stand still: it was as though one had come to judge her before the congregation. Yet not for an instant did her eyes leave the preacher's face. And she was not afraid. "If he casts me into the dust," she thought, "before them all, he won't forsake me there—he will raise me up again!" Nor was she troubled as to what anyone else might be thinking of her. The bond of the final renunciation was between her and the preacher.

"I am not here as Mary Magdalen's apologist. She was a great sinner, but she repented. And now

she is a great saint—one of the most glorious stars in the kingdom of Heaven.”

His lips wore a smile that made Zeekel Draicot feel he would like to have a quiet walk with him in Parum wood. He turned his eyes to the window.

“That is a beautiful light, but it is fading. It is the light of the setting sun, and it will soon be gone; it fades as I stand here. But the light that is upon Mary Magdalen will never fade, never through all eternity!”

He leaned over the pulpit, facing the people.

“Now why is this? Because she repented. That is all—that is all! She was the victim of her own folly, vanity, sin, and of the lust of men.”

He swept his right arm comprehensively over congregation and choir.

“Young men, listen to me! I am going to speak quite frankly to you. I have nothing to say that will make you glad unless you are desirous of being good. I am a stranger to you, and you may never see me again until we stand before the throne of God. But—whatever may in the future befall you in this earthly life—I want you to remember this afternoon in your old church at home.”

Mrs Mewett sat gazing at the east window; she would not condescend to look at the man.

He clasped his hands and cried out:

“The lust of men! the blinding lust of men! the sin that eats out the very eyes of the soul and makes it grope in the mire until it loves the habitation of devils!”

For a moment he was as one who had himself gazed into the pit.

"Mary Magdalen was a beautiful woman, and she had once been good and pure. You have all no doubt seen flowers dashed in the mud after a storm. They are never the same again; no human endeavour can entirely restore their beauty and their purity. It was so with Mary Magdalen in the storms of the lust of men."

He lifted the great Bible and put it on the floor of the pulpit. Again he leaned forward, and now his arms were outstretched.

"I pray you attend to me! Not one or two only, but all who are here—*you—you—you*—everyone to whom this is a light matter. Don't misunderstand me about Mary Magdalen! I have said she was a sinner; did not our blessed Redeemer cast seven evil spirits out of her? But mark this, young men! Mary Magdalen at her worst—at her very worst—even when those seven devils possessed her—was never so bad as the men who betrayed her. Have you thought of that? Some of you have; some have not. Ah, won't you think of it henceforth, and so live up to a strong, and bright, and compassionate manhood?"

He raised himself, and drew a long white finger across his under lip.

"Of the first betrayer of Mary Magdalen's innocence we are told nothing. His identity is veiled in an awful gloom. Perhaps he was the impenitent thief on the cross; perhaps he was the secret companion of Judas. These are only my thoughts; we do not

know. But I tell you that this at any rate is true of him, as it is true of all such men : he became either a great saint, like Mary Magdalen, or he sank lower and lower, until he became so vile that one almost believes he would have new depravities to teach his father the Devil when at last he went to him ! ”

Mrs Mewett was choking. Farmer Windeat began to ask himself whether he ought not to take away his daughters. In Joan's eyes were tears of exaltation.

“ The disciples went to their own home. They were grown tired of waiting and watching. ‘ *But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping.* ’ Don't imagine that this is recorded simply as an historical fact—simply because it was so. Nor is it told merely to show how deep was Mary's repentance, her faith, her love. She had been forgiven ; she had become the friend of the spotless Lamb ; she had touched His hand—O think of that, you who regard not the sanctity of womanhood ; the hand of that woman clasped in the hand of the Son of the Eternal Father ! ”

The preacher stood erect.

“ Mary was at the sepulchre.”

He paused : repeated the words.

“ My brothers !—even had she not repented, even had she died in her sin, I would rather have been in Mary Magdalen's place at the Judgment than in the place of any of her betrayers. And if you say I am pointing to an ideal beyond mortal attainment, I reply, No, no, no ! for contentment with a lower standard means dalliance at the gates of spiritual death.”

The villagers listened eagerly to this message : they

had never heard anything like it before, yet it did not seem strange to them. "I donno," Zeekel said to himself, "what his own failin's may have been, but I doubt if he's always on his knees at the sepulchre;"—so passionate strong natures interpret each other's crying in the wilderness.

"But Mary Magdalen repented, and we think of her now as ineffably pure. O miracle of repentance! O mystery of Divine love! Our Lord chose her, that bruised and despised reed, from among all the multitudes of the earth to be the first—the *first*—let this sink into your hearts and minds!—the first to whom He revealed Himself in His glorified body after His resurrection. My brothers, my brothers, think of that; and then think of her betrayers. . . . *Where were they?* . . . He conferred upon a once notorious woman an honour second only to the honour vouchsafed to His blessed mother herself. And to-day thousands of churches built to the glory of God all over Christendom bear Mary Magdalen's name, and countless faithful souls are praying to her to intercede for them at the mercy seat."

He replaced the Bible on its bulky red cushion. He ended in tones of affectionate intimacy:

"I can tell, from the way you have been listening, that you won't forget this Sunday afternoon in your old church at Harpsfield. I have been speaking to you as a fellow-sinner. But it is not only, you know, my poor voice that you have heard."

He made the sign of the cross, put on his stole, and came down from the pulpit.

Mrs Mewett quitted the church as the last hymn

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was being sung. The brougham was at the church-yard gate. She flicked her hand at the coachman—

“You will at once drive the clergyman back to Great Horsted!”

And, after telling the Rector of the terrible sermon —“The man has demoralised the whole village! It is almost enough,” the angry lady cried, “to make one forget that one is living in a Christian country!”

CHAPTER XV

THE Squire, on the Thursday after this devastating Sunday, strolled in an absent-minded way as far as the rectory meadow, and was about to return when he saw Mrs Mewett signalling to him with her red parasol from the garden. He stayed for luncheon, and praised the rectory cook. The Rector chancing to speak of Potten, the Squire gave some reminiscences of Martin's father.

"He was a year or two my senior, and as boys we struck up quite a friendship. I remember how I envied the black-eyed young villain when he ran away from home and 'went to sea.' He had often told me of his intention, and in those days of hurricane spirit, I brooded on his exploit as the acme of manly courage. Martin's mother was one of his sweethearts, and he came back some years later and married her. It was flat bigamy, for he had another wife living."

"He must have begun very early," said Mrs Mewett.

"Yes, a genuine sailor lad of romance. No one suspected the mischief the scamp was up to, and he seems to have gone through it with amazing light-heartedness. He kept up the deception for fifteen years, and then it was only discovered by the merest accident. He was in the coasting trade, and had a

pleasant little way of apportioning his spare time between the two wives."

"The Blue Beard," said Mrs Mewett.

"Oh, no; he was kind to both, and they were attached to him. I'm told that the Harpsfield wife was never heard to say a word against him, even after she discovered his perfidy. She made a long journey, going most of the way on foot, to the other woman."

"They'd fight like cats," said the Rector.

"Not at all; they mingled their tears. Martin's mother satisfied herself that the other was the prior wife, and then she came home, worked to keep herself and her boy, and waited for the return of her sailor. She said she would go on living with him just the same."

"These people have rarely any moral sense," said Mrs Mewett.

"Oh, she was a real woman, straight out of mother nature's factory. But she never saw him again; he went on foreign voyages after that, and was drowned in the Baltic. The Baltic," observed Mr Burward, "did as well as anywhere else."

Mrs Mewett smiled. "Are you making all this up as you go on?"

"It does sound too natural," he replied, "to be true."

"Potten is to be pitied," said Mrs Mewett, "with such a dreadful parentage and bringing-up."

The Rector, Mrs Mewett, and the Squire sat in the garden after luncheon. Spring thrilled about and above them; birds were nesting; a lark was grown

delirious in the blinding sky. Mrs Mewett told of the crazy clergyman from Great Horsted.

"What was his subject?"

"Oh—almost unmentionable. He glorified Mary Magdalen!"

"Exactly what he would do," said the Squire. "She's fine material, you know."

"Such a man would enslave the minds of the common people."

"Yes," said the Squire, "but he'd give an imaginative glamour to the slavery. Had I known I should have come to hear him. Your sermons aren't a bit shocking, Rector; but then you're not the pure ecclesiastical type."

"I hope not!" said Mrs Mewett.

"You're too wholesome. The pure ecclesiastical type is the sheerest of all rebels; if it didn't believe in another world it would want to play old Harry with this. It always interests me—in youth especially, when its luminous obscurity is like a sort of living apocalypse."

"I must confess," said Mrs Mewett, "that the Revelation of St John has always utterly perplexed me."

"Grand poetry, you know," said the Squire. "Now that young monk in the pulpit at once fears and idealises your sex. Nothing could be more natural than the cult of the Virgin; she fills, in a dreamy, poetic way, the void in hearts which are neither resolutely masculine nor resolutely feminine." The Squire blinked out a cynical smile at the sun. "If that void weren't filled by abstract love—— Well, I've given

some study to the subject. It's as old as the race. They had it in the paganism of Greece and Rome."

Mrs Mewett was looking at a little old woman advancing timidly across the lawn.

"Good day, lady and gentlemen," said Miss Treeves' mother.

"It is very ill-mannered of you," said Mrs Mewett, "to come here without being invited."

"My Janet don't know I've done it, m'am. And I've such a weak heart; it slipped out of its place all of a sudden when I saw you."

"What is it you want?" Mrs Mewett asked impatiently.

"It's about Martin Potten, m'am."

"That man again!"

"O dear me," said Mrs Treeves, "my good gracious me, if my Janet was to know!"

"Are you the mother of the Amazon?" said the Squire.

"She's a dressmaker, sir, and I do wish she hadn't fell out with poor Joan."

"What have they quarrelled about?" Mrs Mewett inquired.

"Not a plain quarrel, m'am, but they're only friends casual now, and Mrs Potten has stopped comin' to our house. Oh, sir," to the Rector, "if only you'd bring Martin to his senses."

"What has he been doing now, Mrs Treeves?"

"Ill-usin' his wife that awful. He's give her a mark on her poor breast that made me shiver to see. She tried to hide it, when I went in, but I made her show it to me, and though she was like a statue woman, as

if she had no feelin', when I put my cheek on hers, so's to comfort the poor thing and make her alive out of her stone-dead misery, then she cried and sobbed as I've never heard a woman do——"

"This is too much!" said Mrs Mewett. "It is most improper for you to mention such things before gentlemen."

Mrs Treeves' hands were trembling under her shawl.

"I told it to Zeekel Draicot," she said. "He's no gentleman, truly, but he can feel for them that suffer—and I wish I hadn't, because he changed so before my eyes, I nearly thought he was another man."

Mr Burward turned to the Rector.

"I've had two or three chats with Draicot in the gardens. There's a tremendous power in that fellow's silence. He gives me the impression of a smouldering volcano. Had he been educated he'd have fluttered a good many doves before the forces of conventional civilisation gave him his quietus."

"You need not stay," Mrs Mewett said. "Tell Mrs Potten to be attentive to her husband, and do all she can to please him. I hope she prepares his meals properly; working-men's wives are often such bad cooks that they give their husbands indigestion, and then wonder why they are ill-tempered!"

The Squire attracted Mrs Treeves' eye. "Do women object to being beaten in moderation?"

"We're not door-mats, sir," said the old lady.

"Now that will do," said Mrs Mewett. "If you go round to the kitchen door, they will give you something to eat."

"Thank you, m'am, but our cupboard will never be empty as long's Janet has two hands on her body and skill to thread a needle."

Mr Burward laughed. "But you should take a drop of whiskey for your heart, Mrs Treeves. I'll send you a bottle."

She turned to him with a pathetic little smile. "I thank you, sir; if I may be so bold, 'tis the Scotch agrees with me best." But she grew serious again as she moved away. "I've told Mrs Potten she should see the doctor for the wound he's give her, but she'll not hear of it."

The Squire watched her out of sight; and his eyebrows expressed the bitter humour of an observer who saw beneath the surface and was yet content to leave the interminable game to others—because of the humour of it.

"After all," he said, "some sort of sublime madness seems to be needed now and then—in the pulpit or out of it—to set right our hopeless sanity."

CHAPTER XVI

It was the night of the Thakeam fair, and Martin Potten slouched about among the wet, bedraggled, listless merry-makers, thinking what fools they were to come miles to be victimised by a gang of town sharpers and mountebanks. He had not himself once missed the fair since boyhood, but it was not now to him the alluring riot it had been, and he would have stayed at home had he not been told by Lucy Lade in the morning that she and Sally Catmer were going.

For an hour he wandered hither and thither looking for Sally; in his sulky temper he would not spend a single penny; his chief occupation being to stand, his hands in his pockets, staring at the flaring petroleum lights, which seemed to fascinate him as they swung in the wind, illumining the booths and the sky.

He was outside the giantess show when he saw Sally and Jim Anscomb standing together. Jim said something to her; she gave a loud laugh; Jim took her arm, and they ran up the steps, Jim chaffing the gaudy damsel at the pay-place as he picked up his change.

Potten followed them into the tent; but he scarce gave a glance at the poor monster that trafficked in nature's blunder. The exhibition was soon over, and in the hurry out Martin lost sight of the pair.

"They've seen me," he said to himself, "and want to give me the slip."

He believed that Jim had made a prior arrangement to take Sally to the fair, and that Lucy Lade had hoodwinked him. He came upon them again at the roundabouts, where they were mounted on wooden steeds, side by side, Jim's hand held high in the air as he stretched back at full length from the reins; and Sally uttering shrieks every time the horses passed those blaring funnels. They dismounted, and Potten accosted them.

"Hullo, Jim, you never said I'd see you at the fair."

"No, old chap, I only made up my mind at the last minute."

"Sally asked you to bring her?"

"No, I didn't then! I never knew he was here."

"It was my luck," said Jim gaily.

"Your luck!" cried Sally. "'Zf I want *your* luck! Keep it, and welcome. I'm off to find Lucy."

She darted away; Anscomb was for going after her, but Martin held him.

"Let's have a drink, Jim; I've not had one to-night yet."

"But I want to speak to Sally."

"She's lost in the crowd."

"I can find her——"

"No, you'll not."

Anscomb stamped his feet and swung his arms, trying to free himself from Martin's grip.

"I'm not going to be bullied by you, as if I was a kid! You can knock your wife about if you like, but

you'll not——" He yelled under Martin's "touch," which meant a sickening twist of the arm.

"Unless you want the other side of your face made to match the dog's half, you'll keep a civil tongue between your teeth about my wife."

They went into a drinking-booth.

"Let's make a night of it, Jim," said Joan's husband. "I've got a notion this is to be my last Thakeam fair," he added meditatively.

He called for more drink, boastfully refusing to allow Jim to pay; and then they went to the fighting tent, where the champion pugilist of the universe challenged all comers, and Potten got excited over a very unequal contest in which a raw young countryman was "knocked silly" and dragged out of the ring like a log of wood. Martin was for entering the lists against the braggart, but Jim persuaded him to keep quiet.

"He might serve you ditto."

"Would he! I'd off with my coat and be at him if I thought you'd not run away."

When they were in the open air: "What are you sticking to me for?" Jim asked with as much wrath as he dared show.

"Because — you've got to go home with me to-night," Potten said.

"Then I won't!" Jim cried.

"We'll see about that. You dodged me once before, Jim—and then took on yourself to pay a visit when my back was turned. But now you'll do it by my invite."

"I won't!" Anscomb repeated. "Don't be an ass,

Martin! I can't go there; I've taken an oath not to—on a blessed family Bible."

"Come on," said Martin; and presently—"Who's family Bible might that have been, Jim?"

Anscomb pretended not to hear the question.

"Let's have a go at this strength-testing machine. You first. A cigar each time you send it up to the top."

"All right." As Martin raised the hammer he saw Jim cunningly stoop and pick something from the ground. Jim put it in his pocket, and assumed his most innocent air. Martin brought down the hammer with terrific force. As they moved away: "What was that you picked up, Jim?" he asked.

"Nothing, old chap. Where? Oh—I was only rubbing the mud off my trousers."

"You didn't waste much time about it. What was it, Jim? I saw you ram something white in your pocket."

"Shut up," Anscomb whispered. "Somebody may be looking for it. I covered it first with my foot, and then when the bumpkins were gawking at you I got hold of it."

They entered another drinking-booth. "Keep your money, Jim. Now let's see what you found."

"I'll show you on the road; I can't now with all these jossers about."

"But I want to have a look at it. Come on."

"I'll not then!"

Anscomb, nettled at his companion's domineering tone, turned to go; but Martin seized him and tried to get the thing out of his pocket. Jim resisted;

they closed ; at last Potten administered his " touch," which enraged Anscomb. He snatched something out of his pocket, and held it at arm's length, shouting : " You'll go too far ! "

" He's got a knife ! " cried one of the bystanders.

" It's open," exclaimed another—" he's going to stab you, Martin ! "

" No, I'm not," Jim said. " It was open when I— O you beastly coward ! "

" Let it go, then," said Potten.

The knife fell to the ground ; Martin picked it up. It was a large weapon, with a white handle. " A foreign-looking sticker, Jim." He tried to put down the formidable blade, but it would not move. " A bit rusty at the joint ; but it's sharp enough." He smiled, winked at the onlookers, and put it in his pocket. " I'll not tempt you with a murderous dagger like that on a dark night, Jim." Anscomb laughed, to conceal his mortification, and they left the booth together.

" I want that knife, old chap. I found it, and it's valuable."

" Some day, Jim. When we're having supper, perhaps."

Anscomb called him a thief, and on the instant Potten was in a fury. But he did not strike ; and by-and-by the two were again in the fighting tent. After that Martin paid for more drink.

" You're costing me something, Jim." They were facing each other, their elbows resting on the extemporised bar. " Yes," Potten said, nodding darkly, " you've cost me a lot—in more ways than one."

Their eyes met in the long, nervous gaze of understanding which must not be expressed. It was when Jim's teeth were shown in a self-conscious smile that Martin said it was time to go home.

"But I want that knife."

"You'll not get it till you're in my house."

"Well—I won't go," Anscomb declared.

Martin gripped the lapel of his coat. "Who's family Bible was that you swore the oath on?"

"That's my secret."

"It'll have to be mine as well. I want to know who's been interfering between me and my wife."

"It was only Zeekel's fun, Martin."

"That's enough. If Zeekel was at the fair I'd want to have a walk home with him."

"Zeekel could face the devil and not turn a hair, I believe," said Jim. "He lured me to the almshouse and made me swear never to enter your house as long as I live. He's mad on your wife; but I don't think, you know," said Jim confidentially, "there's any harm in it."

"That'll do," broke in Martin significantly; "I'd trust my wife with a hundred Zeekel Draicots! But Zeekel's to be reckoned with for all that."

Jim stood close up to him. "If you've got such a high opinion of her—why do you want me to go there?"

"That's another matter."

They left the fair and called at the White Pigeons. "When I first saw you here," Martin said to Jim, "that night of the club feast, and thought what it meant—you to come back——" Again the mutual

gaze of unspeakable knowledge. "Ah, well," said Potten, "I've got over it."

They set out on their homeward journey. The night grew colder and there was more wind on the uplands. The rain was slight, but the sky seemed full of it. Jim told his companion—neither was sober now—of how he and Zeekel had passed the night in Parum wood.

"I believe he'd have done it even on a night like this!"

"I'll put a stop to him coming to my place," said Potten.

It was a few minutes to midnight when they got into Dripping-pan lane. The village lay in a stormy blackness. When they were outside Potten's house—

"I say, you know," Anscomb whispered, "it's jolly mean to make me go in. She'll not stand it."

"Has she been saying she wouldn't?"

"No, no, old chap!"

"Well, you're going in," Potten said doggedly.

Jim held his arm. "Oh, upon my word, I'd rather do anything else—she'll be fearfully upset, Martin."

"That's my affair."

"But she'll be sound asleep," Jim urged.

"Then she'll soon be woke up."

Martin threw open the door and pushed Jim into the house.

CHAPTER XVII

THE lamp was at its lowest ebb. As Potten turned it up he motioned Anscomb to a chair before the window. For some while neither spoke.

It was as though Conscience had all at once called upon them to plead, and they were dumb, not from pure shame, but rather in a transfixed calculation as to what now should happen. Potten scarcely moved ; Jim sat with his hat on his knees in the attitude of eager expectancy.

Martin then locked the outer door, and put the key in his pocket. He placed the white-handled knife on the table, smiling knowingly at Jim. The fire had been banked up with cinders ; he stirred it, threw on more fuel, making a blaze.

"That looks cosier," Jim said in an undertone, and drew his chair on the hearth, warming his hands. "If she's asleep, let her be. It's past twelve o'clock." Martin stood by him in a way Jim did not like. "If you're set on keeping me, I'll make shift anyhow, and you could tell her in the morning I'd been here. She'd not take it so bad—that kind of revenge."

"What are you talking about? It's not in your power to be revenged on her!"

Potten turned to the table ; the remainder of the meat pudding they had had for dinner was laid out with even more than Joan's ordinary daintiness.

"She's not touched it herself. Gone to bed hungry."

"Has she?" said Jim.

"I'm not speaking to you," said Joan's husband. He looked at the bedroom door, which was partly open, and on noticing that Anscomb was looking at it too—"Keep your eyes off there!" he said in a fierce whisper.

Jim moved uneasily on his chair.

"I'll come some other day——"

"You'll stay where you are. We'll have that oath out to-night. She never asked *me* to make you perjure yourself."

"I don't believe she put Zeekel up to it, Martin."

"But he understood what was to be done. That's where she lets him take my place. He's come in where I should be."

Anscomb, reading his captor's words grossly, said in soothing tones: "They're all right, old chap—them two."

The rain beat on the window; the flimsy cottage shook before the storm.

"She's made up her mind to defy me. I can feel it as if . . . Did I lock that door?" He tried it, and came back to the hearth. Anscomb intently watched his every movement. "It's the first time she's done it. She's always worsted me—though only now openly. This is the test of how it's to end." He drew up a chair, and sat down, his head and shoulders bent forward. "It was you that began it!"

"What a night," said Jim. "We just missed that

downpour." He gave Martin's foot a playful little kick. "She's straight's a die. So is Zeekel——"

"I don't bother about him," Potten muttered. "It's those others. Good God, those other men! If I could kill them all and give her a clean slate!"

"You oughtn't to cast them up at her, Martin."

"I don't! You're a liar to say it!" He pressed the palms of his hands upon his eyes. "And I'm a liar to deny it! But they come between us. For ever between us! She's left them, and I'm—I'm among them! Just like one of them myself! That's how she sees me."

"But she's never said anything of that sort to you, old man."

"No, she's not. Last thing she would say! I don't believe she thinks it. But *I* think it—she *makes* me think it in spite of myself."

Jim was entirely puzzled; he patted Martin's shoulder and suggested that the drink had got up in his head.

"It's not reason," he said, "you fetching me in."

Potten threw himself back in his chair; his eyes were wild—half mad, Jim thought—in the firelight.

"Was it reason, I wonder, that made me marry her? She expected I would grow to what she is herself. But I began with the others, and marriage didn't alter it—I'm still with them!"

"I'm certain, Martin, she don't hate you."

"No—it's not hate. If it was there'd have been a pair of us making hell in our home. I could meet her on her own ground if it was common hate. I'd have tamed her—and so I have." He laughed bitterly.

"That's where I'm a liar again! Tame, tame, tame! A regiment of soldiers couldn't tame her! I believe she's got a double life. Sometimes when she looks at me I see her other self—and there's no taming *that*." This he said in a dull monotone. Then he stood up and began to shout: "She's the wrong woman for me; I ought to have married Sally Catmer!"

"Sh—she'll hear," said Jim.

Potten wheeled round upon him.

"All this is through you! She'd never have gone away but for you!—not fit to be alive in the same world with her!"

In the silence that followed this outburst, a faint sound as of a stifled sob came from the next room.

"Let me go, Martin. You can keep—I'll make you a gift of the knife I found."

"I don't want your stolen property."

"Upon my honour I found it."

But Martin paid no heed to him. He stood with his foot on the fender, his elbow on the mantel-shelf.

"That parson from Horsted preached at me. Oh, she knew—but she's never said a word about it." He looked straight at Anscomb as a condemned man may look out from the scaffold. "She's got a big black mark on her breast. She's never showed it to me. I saw it when she was asleep." He stood upright and struck his chest violently. "I can feel it here—here—every time I think of it—worse than she feels it herself!" His hands clutching the mantel-shelf, he bowed his head till his brow rested on it. "That parson made me feel I'd got a saint for my wife. He said he'd not like to be in my shoes. But look

what she's been, Jim! It's all on me—so he made it out what he said about the sepulchre. Nobody knows what it is to be with her sometimes. Like a lamb in the slaughter-house!" His shoulders heaved in a great sigh; he moved round a little so that Jim should not see his emotion. "I was going to speak to the Horsted preacher in the vestry, and ask him what I should do, but he had hold of Nicholas Draicot's hands, and was laughing and chattering to him. Nick blubbering." Potten laughed; then suddenly turned to the table. "But she's my wife, and I'm not going to be beaten in my own house!" He examined curiously the white-handled knife. "Some trick about this. How won't it shut?"

"Let me try," said Jim.

"Oh, you can't if I can't. I'll cut you a slice of bread with it."

"Sharp, isn't it?" said Jim.

"And so are you—but not as sharp's you think. You are a conceited pup, Jim. I'll leave it on the table, and you'll get it when our bargain's complete." His eyes wandered to the bedroom door. "Joan!"

"Don't call her, old man——"

"Joan!"

She answered:

"Yes, Martin."

"I want you to get up and make a warm supper."

"Say you're wet through," Jim whispered, "and stone cold."

Martin roughly told him to mind his own business. He listened.

"Joan!"

But now she made no reply.

"She knows it's me," said Jim.

"Of course she does!"

Potten waited a moment, then again called her name.

"Do you hear? I want a hot supper."

He went to the door and looked in.

"So you're getting up at last!"

He returned to the hearth.

"Is she?" Jim asked in a low voice.

"Yes—she's dressing,"

Anscomb's face expressed astonishment.

"I'd have laid ten to one she'd have refused point-blank."

"You don't know yet what she'll do," Martin said.

"I say, she'll order me out—and oh, good Lord, let me go and have done with it."

"That won't have done with it!"

"No—she'll never forgive you. And I don't blame her. I don't care what you say, Martin. No woman would! Heavens, what a night!"

Martin strode to the bedroom and flung open the door.

"What are you putting on your boots for?"

Joan came into the living room. She was fully dressed, but her head was bare. Never, thought Jim Anscomb, had she been as beautiful as that in the old days. But his own feeling toward her was very different now; and he began to understand, in his dulled beast way, something of Martin's strange talk about her.

But Joan seemed not to look at the unwelcome guest. Her husband asked her why she had dressed

herself, and she replied without a tremor in her voice :

"You told me to get up."

"But I only want you to warm the supper."

She answered, still very calmly :

"I will do so, Martin, if you will tell that man to leave the house."

"So you stand by your threat!"

"If you so understood what I said—yes, I cannot go back from it."

"You're not going out on a night like this!"

"Then send that man away."

"I won't! I fetched him in for the night, and I intend that here he shall stay."

Joan went into the bedroom. The two men stood watching the door. She returned with her hat and a shawl. Potten snatched them from her and threw them across the room. She pleaded with him in a scorn-burnt pathos of tone.

"There are things a woman cannot do, and this is one of them. I asked you not to allow him to come here; I had a right, as your wife, to make such a request. I should have claimed that right even had I been your slave!"

The solemnity of her voice, the marvellous dignity of her presence, for a moment held both men in an awed silence.

"He'll not go!" Potten said sullenly. All at once he caught her in his arms. "Joan, Joan, I can't help it!" He crushed her till she suffered physical pain. "It was because you threatened me, Joan—the first time you'd done it!" He pressed his face to her

bosom, uttering the cries of elemental passion; you shall hear the same in the woods and in the desert. "You can't go out, Joan!—pitch black night—torrents of rain."

"If the earth," she said, lifting her head above his frenzied embrace—"if the whole world were in convulsion I would rather go out into it and be destroyed than submit to this outrage!"

He released her; Anscomb was afraid to speak.

"Martin—won't you send him away?"

"No!"

She looked across to where he had thrown her hat and shawl.

"I'll not let you have them," he said.

"Then I shall go as I am."

"You'll not leave this house to-night!"

He raised his arm for the blow: it would have fallen had she shown a single nerve-quiver of fear. But she stood erect, absolutely self-possessed. He seemed to choke in his fury; and his hand fell to his side.

"If you go out of my house to-night you'll never enter it again!"

"Martin," Joan said, "even before *him*—I plead with you—though it seemed to me only a few minutes since that I could never bring myself to do it. Oh, don't so dishonour yourself! Don't let him think you have less—even less respect for me than he has. I have suffered a great deal already, and surely you must know I have been patient. I don't wish to defy you—or threaten to do anything unreasonable—oh, no, Martin! If I could bring myself to do what

you ask—but I can't, I can't, my dear! . . . Oh, isn't it plain to you that this is the deepest humiliation to which you could subject me? And I have done nothing to deserve it." Her voice faltered. "My breast is discoloured from your violence . . . God knows," she cried, a rush of tears in her eyes, "that is where I should be wounded—where I should bear the brand—and I have not complained——"

"Mrs Potten," Anscomb said, "I'm sorry, but he made me come."

"Yes, and I'm going to make him stay!" Martin shouted.

"Then," said Joan, "I shall leave the house."

"I'll turn you out!"

He unlocked the outer door, and pulled it open. The rain pelted in.

"Now!—I've done with you. Some of those other men can take you back!"

She went forth, her bare head bowed to the storm; and he shut the door upon her and locked it. Then he returned to his seat by the fire. And for a long while Anscomb durst not utter a word.

At last—"Old man," said Jim, "where'll she find a bed? She's quarrelled with the dressmaker, and she won't go to Sally Catmer." He looked at the clock. "Getting on for one!——"

"I don't care if she has to sleep under a hedge!"

Jim shivered in his chair. "O my starry heavens, Martin, I wish you hadn't made me come. I feel as if a murder had been committed."

"I'll not take her back—we've parted for good!"

She left of her own accord. You know she did, Jim."

"Certainly she wanted to go."

"Ha—you cowardly hound!" Potten roared at him. "You're frightened to say I turned her out!" He lifted up his head and listened to the wind. "She'll not come back—she'd die in a ditch first!" Again he listened to the gale. "And she nothing on her head! . . . I love that woman—every inch of her." He ground his teeth. "She'll be soaked to the skin!—" He blasphemed; beat at his face with clenched hands as though it eased his soul's torment to inflict pain upon himself. "She's not strong, for all she's never had a day's illness. Like a flower—that delicate in her ways. I remember I was in a fear the first night I was alone with her. She never asked me to be good . . . O God, she was always asking me to be good! O—O," Martin groaned, and hid his face in his hands. He did not care now that Jim should see he was breaking down; this, too, before the man he despised, was part of his repentance. "What a life it would have been with that woman if I could have started it with her—and not among those others." His fingers upon his eyes were wet; Jim saw the tears oozing through. "She turned back from what she was, and grew to be a child again." He forced his nails into his brows. "She'll be drenched—to the skin!—"

Anscomb at last ventured to speak.

"You should unlock the door, Martin."

"No, I'll not! She's taken her own course, and I've done with her."

He got up, and went to feed his ferret, but he had no caresses for it to-night. When he returned to the living room Jim was eating a piece of dry bread.

"I'm famishing with hunger, and I'm dead tired," he whined.

"I'll make you up a bed in the scullery. There's only one bed in the house—and nobody sleeps in it this night! There's a lot of guano sacks; the smell's healthy enough, and you'll be able to keep yourself warm."

"But your ferret's in there."

"Oh, if he gets out he'll only gnaw your other face off. Unless he thought it would poison him."

"But he can't get out—can he?"

"Come on," said Martin, "and I'll cover you up. Your clothes must be dry by now."

As Martin was arranging the bed on the floor of the scullery: "Is this the ferret box?" Jim asked.

"He's fastened in. You white-livered cur!" was the host's good-night to his unwilling guest.

But Anscomb had not a mind for tragic issues; and he was soon asleep among the guano sacks.

Martin Potten sat for two hours in the living room, listening to the storm. It grew less and less, but he was not comforted. He sat very still, and was afraid to shut his eyes, for whenever he shut them he saw Joan.

Now she was lying dead on the high-road; now she was on a hill, in a glory of light, calling to him to come to her; now she was on the streets of a great town. . . .

He watched the fire go out, yet it surprised him to notice that the grate was black, and the room grown cold.

He did not give Jim a thought: quite forgot he was in the house; blamed no one but himself for this catastrophe in his life.

He unlocked the front door; stood by it in the feebleness of remorse; he was obeying an impulse that carried him nearer to Joan than he had ever been.

Then he put out the lamp. And as he stood in the darkness he prayed. And this was his prayer:

"O God, teach me to be a better man. Teach me to understand my wife. Forgive me—if you've got ears for such as me—forgive me, if I'm worth it. If I'm not, punish me, and make me different. And bless Joan; O God, bless poor Joan my wife; and give her a comfortable bed to-night, and bring her back to me again. I'll try to be good to her."

And then he lay down on the hearth, and made his arm his pillow.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT seemed to Joan that she had been a long while here, in the lee of the wind by Zeekel's sitting-room window, before he pushed aside the blind and looked out. It was not until she had been worn to exhaustion, buffeted and bruised by the gale, that she had drifted to the almshouse, led thither irresistibly by the light in Zeekel's window. Her delay was not due to any dread she had of trusting herself to him ; he would care for her, and reverence her ; his noble manhood would make any sacrifice for her. At last she had come to him, to this house of the poor, the shrine of her earthly love, and she would fearlessly place herself under his protection till the morning.

And yet she shrank when now he looked out upon her ; and Zeekel, though he had heard a faint sound, did not at once distinguish the bent figure from the shrubs swaying about his window. Then she lifted up her face, and their eyes met ; but no sign was given, by her, by him. The light from the window touched her martyr face ; her arms hung wearily ; her hair was like the storm itself. And deep soul called to deep soul, the immortal silent cry of love.

The blind fell back in its place, and Joan crept to the door. She heard the bolt being cautiously drawn ; then the door was opened, but no hand was held out to welcome her. Zeekel stood with his back to the

wall, holding the door open as though he were her servant, and Joan glided into the passage. A doorway, a few steps down, was filled with warm light, and she moved toward it. But hearing Zeekel close the outer door, she suddenly stopped, and without turning to him said—

"You didn't expect a visitor at this late hour, Mr Draicot."

"I donno but what I did," he answered very gently.

"I have come as a friend," she said.

"I'll keep that in mind, Joan."

Still she paused. Then she said: "I have come to ask you to take care of me for a little while, Zeekel." The words ended in a sigh, and he scarcely heard them.

"It's rainin', Joan," he said; "you've got wet."

"Not very wet," she replied; "I have sheltered as much as I could."

"Then you've been in the open for some time?" He came to her. "Won't you go in, Joan?"

She stepped into his sitting-room. It was not fear that caused her so to hesitate. This was the one man of unselfish mould she had ever known, and in her calamity Joan's spirit rose above all consideration as to what her fellow-mortals might think or say of her.

"I may be bringing trouble upon you, Zeekel, by coming."

"For that," he said, "it's not a thing to bother about, one way or another. This is my easy-chair I've told you of." He pushed it nearer to the fire. "It looks as if it had been waitin' for you, and I donno

but it'll be over proud, after you've sat on it, to let me have a rest." His manner, as he stood beside her when she was seated, was that of a man who was struggling to chasten himself in the triumph of his highest ideals—to be with her at his own fireside, alone, to be trusted by her so completely, to confront the certainty of suffering for her. "It's a cosy enough room—I hope you'll think. Nicholas says it's a palace. Joan, what makes you shiver?"

"I was thinking of Roger's concertina," she said. "Is anyone else awake in the almshouse, Zeekel?"

"The old folks sleep at the other end."

"Would they—perhaps they wouldn't like it if you were to tell them I am here."

He smiled strangely. "I doubt if you could make them understand easy. They're that strict in their old-fashioned ways. But you've got wet, Joan. I'll make the fire brighter, to cheer you up. You'll be comfortable soon." He gave her a clean towel. "If you'll wipe your face and hair." Her hands moved languidly. "Mebbe you'll let me wipe your dress."

"I went up to Parum wood," Joan said, "but I was afraid to go in. I'm not very brave, Zeekel, or I should have come to you at once. Or perhaps," she added with a wan smile, "it would have been braver still had I stayed away."

He was on his knees rubbing the towel over her coarse black dress.

"I'm that glad you've come," he said, but did not look up at her.

"I've never been waited on like this before, Zeekel." He heaped coal and wood on the fire.

"There'll soon be a big blaze to dry you. Are your feet damp, Joan?"

"No—I don't think they are."

"My slippers," he said—"I donno if they'd fit you."

"No, thank you, Zeekel."

"I never wear them myself; it's such a womanish luxury for a man. Effie worked them years ago, and now the old ladies here put them out for ornaments." He removed from the table a razor, a cupful of lather, and a looking-glass that had been tilted against the lamp; the glass in which Nicholas had gazed upon himself in speechless admiration after his first shave. "I'm such a sleepy-head sometimes when it's time to be up; so I was treatin' myself to a shave in advance." He hung the glass on the wall. "I hope you're beginnin' to feel comfortable."

"Yes," she said. "What is the time?" she asked, and he told her, vaguely, past one o'clock; and, "It seemed much longer than that," she said.

"Ay, it would, to a woman on such a night."

She shivered and sighed. "I went to the church first. I don't know why I went there. I could not go to the rectory; and Miss Treeves and I are not friends, you know. I found nowhere to shelter at the church but under the old yew tree. I thought it would fall on me; and after a while I could not bear to be in the churchyard. All the people in their graves seemed to be dead *for ever*. That was an awful thought, Zeekel. It seemed to shut out everything from me, and enclose me between blank walls, where there was no hope, and all I had striven for was of no avail. All those people dead!—and others

suffering wrong and injustice—and no answer to it, no explanation—as though God had hidden His face from our agony!”

“Ay,” said Zeekel, “He’s terrible slow sometimes. I’ve been wonderin’ whether it’s time to jog His elbow.”

“Then I went to Farmer Windeat’s, but the dogs were barking, and a dog barking in the night has always terrified me since I was a child. Then I went along the high-road, but I couldn’t hold up against the wind; and then I went up by the quiet side of the plantation, till I came to the three-cornered copse on Lychpole Hill, but the wind was so strong—and the rain like sleet—so I had to turn back.”

“You never saw nobody in your wanderin’s?” Zeekel asked.

“No, not anyone at all; yet all the while it seemed as though I were being watched. I saw a rook swinging from a pole in a field; it appeared quite human, Zeekel, and I felt pity for it. I suppose it was hanged there as a warning to others; and a strange thought came to me—I wondered had it been so much worse than the others. You see, I was growing selfish, and thinking of myself. Then I went to the wood, and saw the light in your window.”

“I’m that glad I was sittin’ up late with my thoughts, Joan.”

“I could not have lived through the night,” she said. “And yet—had I stayed out—it might have ended all this. I am so tired of it, Zeekel—and the future will be just the same.”

“Will you go back to him, Joan?”

"Yes. Oh—yes; I am his wife. May I rest here till the morning?"

"Ay, to be sure, if you'll be comfortable in the easy-chair."

After a silence—"You won't say anything to make it impossible for me to stay." And after another pause—"What do you think of me for coming, Zeekel?"

"I'm that pleased, and honoured—if I shouldn't say happy—yet not happy—from how it's come to pass—what I've dreamed of." He was standing behind her chair. She lay back in it, her hands folded, the glow of the fire upon her dishevelled hair. "It's queer, Joan, what you've gone through should bring that young look in your face."

"I'm not very old, you know," she said, smiling. "You are very kind," she went on in a more formal tone; "I shall never be able to thank you."

Zeekel stood back from her.

"I could sleep in the easy-chair—if you'd take my bed."

"No, no, I must not deprive you of it."

"It's not been slep' in since last night. If you sleep where you are you'll be that stiff when you want to walk. And supposin' I was to leave you here, and get a bed at Effie's——"

"She would not let you in."

"Nicholas might, on the sly, if I was to tap at the window and wake him."

"Oh, but your sister would be sure to hear. You are only offering to do this because you wish to guard me from the village gossip. You would walk about

all night in the rain if Effie didn't let you in. And I really don't mind what people say of me now, Zeekel; and I don't think you do either."

"It's different for me," Draicot said.

He drew nearer to her, and she looked up at him.

"We are very much alike, we two. Both of us seem to be apart from all the others, as though we had been driven by the force of circumstances to make a law for ourselves. I made that law when I left my husband; you made it when you allowed me to come into your room. But people who behave—who are compelled to do such unusual things—we have a great responsibility to ourselves and to each other. And we are going to be true to it, Zeekel." She paused. "I can trust you—my dearest friend."

He moved the table, and moved the lamp on the table; there seemed no reason why he should do this.

"You donno how bad I am, Joan——"

"But," she said, "we made up our minds—long ago—to be good. And it is when the trial comes that our sincerity——"

He passed her, and she held her breath. But he sat on the stool at the end of the fender. His heart was like to break through his breast. He kept his hands clasped between his knees, not to let her see that he was shaking—the strong, weak man to whom love had come late, and then the one love, and the hopelessness of it!

"That rook on the pole will get his feathers washed. But he'd be dead before he was hanged. When it's a man—he's livin' when they do it." He stared into the crackling wood. "Some must be served like that,

I suppose. It's writ against them, and not to be escaped."

"You mustn't say such things, Zeekel."

"It was only my notions about the rook. Funny that passers-by should think him shameful treated, and him not to heed. I beg your pardon, Joan."

He added presently—"If you've made up your mind to bide in the easy-chair, then I'll put on more fuel, and go to bed."

"Yes, Zeekel; but the fire will do as it is. And the key—is it in the door? I shall be gone before you are up."

"The door's only bolted," he said.

"Then I can let myself out. Perhaps, after all, no one will know I have been here."

"Mebbe not," Draicot said.

For some minutes neither spoke. It was a silence to Zeekel of exquisite happiness and exquisite pain. The wind moaned in the trees and over the alms-house.

"The storm may have passed by daybreak," Joan said.

"Ay—I hope there'll be a fine sunrise for you, Joan."

He was again behind her chair; and she, thinking he was going to bed, said—

"Good-night, Zeekel."

"Good-night," he answered. He turned down the lamp a little. "But mebbe you'd like it up——"

"No, thank you."

"Then I'll leave it as it is. You'll not be nervous by yourself?"

"Oh, no ; I shall be quite comfortable."

"'Tis a cosy seat," he said.

How they harped on her comfort ; and how small a place it now had in the terror of their souls !

"You'll find fuel in the box in the corner there, if you should be cold, sittin' here alone." He was at his bedroom door. "Good-night——"

"Good-night," she said.

He stood perfectly still, his back to her. Then she knew he had turned, and was looking at her.

"Joan . . ."

She neither spoke nor moved.

"Joan . . ." He touched her shoulder, saw the quivering of her lips. He kissed her hair. His chest sank on the top of the chair, and his right hand slipped gradually round her face till he held it under her chin. "Joan . . ." She closed her eyes, and he kissed their lids, kissed tears out of them. His heart was beating upon her shoulder. "Joan, Joan," he said, and pressed his cheek to hers. "Oh—I donno what I'm doin', Joan ; I never meant to do it. It's as if for the last time . . ." He kept his face to hers ; every breath was a sigh. And then his lips moved down her cheek to her mouth. She opened her eyes, and it seemed to him that life and death, all beauty and anguish, burst out upon him in her tears. But he held his lips to hers, and caught her head in his arms and lifted it up, and the mighty whirlwind of his love moaned out upon her. "Joan, your lips are that sweet—like honey—sweeter than honey, Joan . . ." She neither gave herself to him, nor resisted his embrace. She was like an appalled child, under his passion ; but, even as he

kissed her, and held her in the supreme fascination, she had a vision of the horror of her old life.

"I've told you I'm that bad and mean!——"

He let her go, and stood off from her chair.

"Zeekel," she said, "I can't be wicked again. Oh, I can't, my dear, I can't!"

And then on a sudden he prostrated himself at her feet, and grovelled there—man no more—in his utter weakness.

"O, my God, I donno what's come to me! . . ."

"Zeekel," she said, "I love you—O, my love, my love!—but I can't go back from what I've come to; I couldn't, Zeekel—not even for you! . . ."

But he could not lift up his head, for he was come to the Golgotha of his love. She put her hand on his brow, and he took hold of it, kissed it again and again, rubbed it on his mouth, his cheeks, his eyes. Then he rose, and went to the door.

"Where are you going, Zeekel?"

"I'll try to rouse my brother. You see what's in me—and you only come for me to protect you! I never thought I could be that low and mean—a shame to you and to myself!"

He went into the passage. Joan heard him open and shut the outer door. The storm raged upon the almshouse.

CHAPTER XIX

THE shortest way to Effie's was down by the school and through the glebe; but Zeekel, after leaving the almshouse, trudged along the Thakeam road, on the opposite side of the village. The gale, as such, gave him small concern. Was not Martin Potten in it—in the darkness, in the air, and on the land? Everywhere Martin Potten, his cruelty, his oppression! And Zeekel had promised Joan that it should be a fine sunrise for her.

"Thou shalt do no murder."

Ay, he was not forgettin' that. It had often enough been dinned in his ears by the parson in church. The thought had lived with him; it had become more than a guest—part of his nature; he was wedded to it.

A man must straighten himself and take the consequences. For Zeekel Draicot had reached a spiritual *cul-de-sac*, and the only way out was by violence; he knew of no other argument. He went on, wilder than the night.

"Thou shalt do no murder."

They'd hang him, of course, at Great Horsted, inside those high black walls. Nothing new in that. Often hangings there; folks came to see the black flag go up. Zeekel had seen it himself twice (once with Martin), but neither of them would see the ensign of death when next it was hoisted. One would be

hanging on the scaffold, his arms and legs bound—Zeekel saw himself, and interpreted the vision as a thing that must be ; the other would be in his grave, slain and sent there in righteous justice.

Not that Martin was altogether unfit to live ; in himself he had qualities Zeekel liked. But as Joan's husband, as Joan's oppressor, his heart must be made to stop before again the sun rose on Harpsfield.

"Thou shalt do no murder."

Ay, it was writ ; the law was there. But if a man was willing to take the consequences ?

They said that sort of end was shameful. Nicholas would be terribly upset for a while. They read the burial service over you, so's you could hear it, then burned you to nothin' in quicklime, and your grave-stone was the first letters of your name cut in the prison wall. After that Martin and him would be on terms of equality. To nothin' in quicklime—as if he'd care what they did to him when he was dead !

Joan's love—his love for Joan—remained. What could they do to destroy that ? He'd be gone and she left ; but mebbe there was somewheres else.

Life for life, that was fair ; he was ready to pay his share. He'd begin the settlement now—if Martin was to appear before him on the road. But after . . . Joan's love, his love . . . they'd get out into a freedom he'd never known ; he'd tear and fight through legions of devils to be where she was. If she was in heaven, she'd come to him ; if he was in hell, he'd go to her.

"Thou shalt do no murder."

And now Draicot had grown humble, fallen on a strange, horrible content. He was in the deeps again,

face to face with the great inarticulation ; the rain-washed earth, as he looked at it in the pale light that was breaking upon the world, was at one with him in the inscrutable mystery of things. Yet there was something else—something to be solved, something to which he would presently awake, for he felt proud too, in a stranger, impersonal way, that it should be given to him to execute this just judgment.

"Thou shalt do no murder."

Ay, ay! he was not sayin' nay. But he did not discern the Command blazing across the angry heavens. His perception of the crime was less vivid than the motive. He had no sophistry to offer his conscience. The thing would be done, and the penalty paid, with no complaint, no excuse ; a man could not speak of the woman he loved or of what he was prepared to do and to endure for her ; that was the secret where you kept calm and strong through it all.

Zeekel looked up to the sky. "I donno what's to be the end. I donno if Your stars are eyes, like my mother said, watchin'. But You've been that terrible slow! . . ."

A man may be essentially noble, but when his mind is maddened, his whole nature perverted by a sense of wrong and of long-deferred retribution, he recks little of the laws of God or man. He may not crave to be a law to himself ; the common round may be all his crude intelligence asks ; he may have a shrinking dread of being flung out before his fellows in honour or dishonour. But with that volcanic sorrow in his heart he will act, not according to civilised rules, which are mere bubbles in comparison with the flaming

reality of his concentrated purpose, but from the very centre and innermost shrine of his being, from the raw creative core of nature, the irrational impulse that produces chaos because it cannot bear its torment and cannot interpret the august symbolism of suffering; and his deeds will at once proclaim and shatter the loftiest ideals of humanity. He may be called murderer, but that will not tell all. Nor is it exhaustive to call him fanatic. He may be named madman, but again that is not the whole truth.

As Draicot passed the holly tree in the hedge on the Thakeam road he heard his name uttered faintly in smothered accents, as from the bowels of the earth. Looking down, he saw an object huddled under the tree. It was Roger Coö. He asked him what he was doing there, and Roger groaned. Zeekel pulled him out of the ditch.

"I've my doubts if you're sober, Roger. Lean on me. What's that under your coat?"

"My concertina."

They were walking back to the village; Roger clinging to Draicot's arm.

"Mr Tankervil's been out on the spree, Zeekel. He gave me a lift in his trap, and the next I knew was at the Green Lamb at Polin. I played to them, and Mr Tankervil drove off to Horsted and left me."

"A man of his years should have more sense," said Zeekel.

"They said at Polin he'd overtake me and pick me up."

"You don't begin wantin' picks up. Pick yourself up, and have done with it. Nobody else cares."

"Oh, Zeekel, I'm that sleepy."

"Ay, it's sleep you want, with mammy to tuck you in," said Draicot with pity. "Don't stop; it'll freshen up your silly brains to keep on the move. I'll take you home."

"No, don't. Sally would be in a rage to be woke up. She's been that partic'ler since the night Martin made her go to his house."

Roger stumbled; Zeekel caught him, and they went on.

"So Sally was in Martin's house at night, eh?"

"Yes, and didn't she carry on when he spoke rough to his wife. Where are you takin' me to, Zeekel?"

"Home, to be sure."

Roger stopped; he would have fallen had Zeekel attempted to drag him on.

"Oh—I can't go to Sally's."

"Well, I'll keep you company a while. Here's Farmer Windeat's, and mebbe we'll find a hole to crawl in."

"But the dogs," said Roger. "Hark to the dogs."

"They're chained," said Zeekel. "Here's a hayrick, if you are frightened to go into the yard to seek a stable. Stand up against it. The wind don't find us out much here, and it's dry."

"Don't leave me, Zeekel. This is where Martin catches the birds for his ferret."

"Ay, he's fond of that ferret of his," Draicot observed.

"Zeekel—what's that in the field over there? Seems to be movin'."

"It's the rook on the pole." Zeekel fell silent.

"Hanged for a warnin' to other sinners. See how he swings—just like a man that had killed somebody."

"I've never seen a man hanged, Zeekel."

"Then you're too late; they don't make a raree show of it now. But it don't signify to the rook there, and I doubt whether the others give him a thought. He had his day, and that was to be his end. Now he's hangin' by the neck."

"I'm that sleepy, Zeekel."

"Keep up your heart, lad. The sky's clearin'; I can see the dawn peepin' through the clouds, as if it was timid to come out, with that gallows up there in the field. Don't slip down, Roger; stand off a minute, and I'll make you a nest in the hay."

"What are you doin' out this late, Zeekel?"

"Oh, only for one of my wanderin' expeditions. Now sink yourself in here, and you'll soon be warm."

"This is nice, Zeekel."

"Then don't slip again. Are you sick now?"

"No, not as sick as when you found me. But I'm that sleepy."

"Then close your eyes. Horses can sleep standin', so I donno why a man shouldn't. The rain's only a dribble now, and the wind's tired itself out. There's a star, bright at his last gasp when the mornin' comes. And the rook hangs quiet where they've set him up as a gazing-stock."

"Twinkle little star," muttered Roger 'twixt sleeping and waking. "High—like a diamond in the sky——"

"Ay, like a diamond," said Zeekel, watching Roger.

"Warmer now?" he said presently, and was answered with a drowsy incoherence. He waited some minutes: then—"You'll be asleep, Roger?" he said, and now there was no response.

Zeekel stood off from the hayrick, and gazed across the fields. He glanced back at Roger. "So you're in the land of Nod—eh?" he said in a louder tone. The worn-out musician gave no sign; and Zeekel left the hayrick.

He walked fast, with head forward, eyes set on the ground, his gait as steady as though he were merely going to work. The sun was coming. A lovely grey light, brightening every moment, was on the hills, creeping in lilac waves toward the darker curves of Parum wood. Birds were about, chirping gaily at the ending of night and storm and the promise of day. The whole earth was beginning to rejoice; the rooks were circling over the great trees in the park. The rain had ceased; the wind was gentle and fragrant.

No one was astir in the village. The hour of toil was not yet. The cottages seemed very peaceful; their blinds pulled down, the sweet stillness of the dawn upon them.

Martin Potten's house faced the east. On opening the door, Zeekel heard a heavy breathing. He stood to listen. He did not know that Jim Anscomb was in the house; he did not know that Martin had gone to sleep with a prayer on his lips. There was light enough in the living room to enable him to see vaguely everything there. What he saw was a white-handled knife on the table. He had never seen it before; Martin must have bought it at the fair. The

house, but for that heavy breathing, was like a house of the dead.

The knife was open. Zeekel took it up, looked at it, looked at the man lying on the hearth. He moved round the table, fell on his knees; drove the knife through Martin's heart.

"Now, Roger lad, time to think of work."

"I believe I've been asleep, almost, Zeekel."

"That's because of your cosy nest in the hay."

"What's the clock, Zeekel?"

"Half past four, just on. Now no more drowsin' off. It's your turn to see to the stoves."

"My, you are kind to be company with me this long while, Zeekel. Sally will say, good job too, I'll not have to make his bed. Haven't you been asleep yourself?"

"No, I've not slep' much. But there'll be a sound long sleep waitin' for me not far off. Them cocks are crowin' all at once—and that rook up there in the field, never concernin' itself. Here's a trap crawlin' down the Horsted road."

"It's Mr Tankervil. He's noddin' on his seat. Call at him, Zeekel, or he'll fall out."

"No, he's safe. The horse will see him to his door."

"Did he speak, Zeekel?"

"Not a word! Hardly a groan!——"

"What for should he groan?"

"Eh? . . . I donno! . . . What did you say?"

"I thought Mr Tankervil spoke as his trap passed by."

"No—not to my hearin'. Come, Roger."

"Oh, I've such a longin' on me, just like when I've been with Martin in his house sometimes, to play 'Home, sweet Home'——"

"Not now! Mr Windeat's dogs might be offended. Wake up your drowsy head, and I'll go with you to the gardens. Then you can rest for an hour in the shed, and I'll see to the fires for you. I daresay there'll be an hour to spare before they come for me. No more talk! Rouse yourself!"

"I am tired, Zeekel. Oh, dear, there's the sun."

"Ay, he's coming up. . . ."

Joan is at the door of her home. The village is still very quiet. She pauses—someone is moving strangely in the living room. Is Zeekel there? As Joan opens the door, Jim Anscomb tries to shut it upon her. He is panic-stricken.

"Mrs Potten—" his voice is a shriek—"you can't come in!"

Her mind is a blank to his infamy. She feels it no outrage when he pushes her back.

"Where is Martin?"

Still he tries to prevent her from entering.

"Joan!—my good God—don't come in!"

"Is Martin here?"

"Yes—he's here! But you can't see him!"

"Who is with him?"

"Nobody!"

"Who is in the house?"

"Nobody but us two!"

Joan presses forward. "I must see him! Let me in!"

"You can't, you can't!"

She has one foot across the threshold. She is deadly pale. She has not noticed that Anscomb had called her by her Christian name.

"This is my home. You cannot keep me out. I shall not go away till I have seen him!"

"Wait a minute then!" Jim seems to be arranging his jacket. "I left it on the table!" he cries in horror.

"What did you leave on the table? You must let me in!"

"Joan—Joan—it's too horrible for you to see!"

She enters, and a great chill strikes her. She is aware of the presence of the ultimate silence. Yet she sees nothing but the broken door of her bedroom.

"What has happened to my husband?"

"Joan—he's killed himself!"

"Killed . . . killed himself!"

"Yes! he must have done it because you left him—and with my knife!——"

"Your knife!"

Anscomb falls back from her gaze.

"The one I found at the fair."

"It is in your pocket!"

"I've just put it in. It's mine—I didn't want them to suspect——" He holds up the knife. "It was stuck in his heart!——"

"Blood upon it, and on your hand!"

"That's when I pulled it out——"

"Blood on your hand!"

Anscomb screams in a frenzy: "That was when I

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pulled it out! Good God, haven't I told you? I never touched him! There's nothing to hide; I'm making a clean breast of it."

"Stand aside!"

"Joan! Don't look at him! You'll never forget it. He's awful to see."

She says again—

"Stand aside!"

The table has been overturned, the lamp smashed; there is a strong smell of paraffin. Joan stands by the body on the hearth. Its eyes are wide open.

"Martin . . ." It is as though she thought him asleep, and was trying to wake him.

"He's done it himself, Joan!"

"Martin . . ."

"He's dead, Joan!"

She looks at the shivering coward.

"Your knife, you say?"

"Yes; he took it from me at the fair and kept it."

"I saw it on the table last night——"

"Yes; lots of people saw us quarrelling about it at Thakeam. I was to have it back if I came home with him. It's mine; I found it—but I never touched him."

"Killed with your knife!" Joan is on her knees by the body. "His eyes are open. I think he can see me."

As Anscomb moves, his heel crunches the shattered lamp glass.

"He's done it himself, Joan!"

She touches the dead face. Then her hands trail on the floor as she falls into a shrunken attitude.

"He's done it himself, Joan! I was sleeping in the scullery after you left—on the guano sacks; he spread them out for me. I heard his ferret making a noise; it was that woke me, I think."

"Draw up the blind."

But Anscomb stands still.

"Let it be, Joan! Somebody might pass."

"You are afraid of that!"

"I'm not! Why should I be?"

"Draw up the blind!"

Anscomb tugs at the cord; the roller comes down among the flowers on the window sill. Anscomb starts back from the sudden rush of morning light.

"Don't think I'm frightened! I've no cause—I've nothing to do with it! Anybody can see he's killed himself."

Joan lifts her eyes to the window; a glint of gold is on the panes.

"The table," she says, "is overturned. There has been a struggle——"

"No, no! I upset it in my fright when I saw what had happened."

"But no one," says Joan, "no one else has been here. You said yourself—no one else—and you would have heard if anyone had entered the house. No one can have been here. Only you two! I heard him lock the door when I went out. . . . You saw him lock the door?"

"Yes. Joan, what's in your mind?"

"Did you hear him unlock it?"

"No. The wind was high——"

"But you must have heard! You must have heard

had anyone entered. He sleeps lightly—he must have heard himself.”

“But the door was unlocked when you came——”

“You were going out!”

“No, I wasn’t! It was when I heard you. I’ll swear I never unlocked it. You opened it—that’s when I tried to stop you coming in.”

“Why did you wish to stop me? He is my husband. I had a right to know that he had been murdered.”

“It’s not murder, Joan! He’s done it to himself.”

“You keep saying that. And you say you did not hear anything.”

“Only the ferret. It must have smelt the blood.”

Joan passes between the fallen table and the window. The sunlight gleams in her hair.

“You must not leave the house till someone comes.” She advances automatically to the door. “I left you with my husband. It is your knife!”

“Joan—Christ!—you can’t believe I did it?”

“You had the knife in your pocket. You were trying to hide it from me.”

Anscomb, still more terrified, cries: “What should I murder him for? He’d have mastered me in a minute. But he’s not been murdered!”

Joan is at the door.

“No one else has been in the house. You say you heard nothing. . . .” All at once she becomes like a woman demented. “It is your knife! You must give an account of this! No one else——” She listens. “There is a vehicle passing.” She goes out.

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"It is Mr Tankervil." She calls: "Mr Tankervil!
Mr Tankervil!"

"Joan!——"

The trap stops. Mr Tankervil comes up the path.
Joan is like a copy of death.

"This man has murdered my husband."

CHAPTER XX

MR TANKERVIL, at eleven o'clock on this fair morning after the storm, strolled in his garden smoking a long clay pipe. The narrow, crowded paths having been traversed, and here and there a weed pulled up and a flower encouraged after its ill-treatment by wind and rain, he sat in a honeysuckle arbour and contemplated the village. The view did not make him enjoy his pipe the less because it included Martin Potten's house. He saw the church, with starlings gleaming on the tower; the pond, from the rim of which he hoped the swallows would soon be helping themselves to mud for their nests in the eaves of his house; the rectory—(that would be Mrs Mewett coming out of the gate with a parasol like a big peony dancing over her head); the schools under the elms; Dripping-pan lane; and every now and then he perceived a female figure, sometimes two together, gliding as if on tiptoe from one cottage to another. And that was a carriage on the high-road; Mr Tankervil watched it stop at the inn, and saw two or three men step out of it.

Those peas were coming up fast: the row down there, in the shelter of the bit of rubble wall that filled a gap in the hedge, might be ready for staking. It was early yet, but the stakes would make the villagers talk when they gave him greeting over the

wall. The next person to look over the wall, however, had no thought of applauding the retired grocer's precocious gardening.

"I've seen him, Mr Tankervil! But only with the sheet over. He's been laid out on boards and empty barrels in the stable at the Coach and Horses. The police say he's to be kept there for the inquest." Sally Catmer's arms were akimbo on the low wall; her face was covered with perspiration. "Oh, Mr Tankervil, I can't stop indoors! I've begun to get the dinner ready twenty times, but I can't! Oh, poor Martin! poor Mrs Potten! Three new police from Horsted. They say one's a judge with gold braid on his sleeves. They've turned the house upside down, and he's locked in the stable now."

Mr Tankervil went on staking his peas.

"He'll not run away, poor fellow."

Sally's voice shrilled out revengefully: "They should hang Jim Anscorb ten times over!"

"Once'll be as much as he wants in a lifetime," Mr Tankervil remarked.

"I couldn't see poor Martin's face for the sheet. What was he like, Mr Tankervil?"

"Oh, the customary death-look. I had the police to take down my statement as soon's I got to bed. So I've nothing fresh for you, Sally."

"Didn't you faint when you saw him, Mr Tankervil? Oh, I'd have screamed and gone off! They say his teeth were showin'—like this."

"Now, Sally, don't you make them faces over my garden wall, or it'll topple down under you."

Sally began to cry. "Lots of blood—wasn't there,

Mr Tankervil? Oh, poor Mrs Potten; I wish I could see her. She's with that Miss Treeves. They'd fell out before, because Miss Treeves is in love with Zeekel Draicot and she thought Mrs Potten——"

"No scandal, Sally. We've had plenty of it already."

"But she's forgive Mrs Potten, and took her into her house."

"A true womanly thing to do," said Mr Tankervil. "My wife's going to send her down some new laid eggs."

"Would you let me take them, Mr Tankervil? I might see her then; Miss Treeves couldn't prevent me when I had a gift for her."

"My wife'll be wanting to take them herself. You be off home."

"But I'm that nervous; I jump out of my skin at anything. I've broke two saucers and our best cream-jug, and when my hair got tangled in the canary cage I screamed and down it come on my head. I can feel the seed stickin' in my back. Mr Tankervil!—they've took Jim Anscomb in the handcuffs when Horsted. I saw him get in the cab."

"Not much you've missed, Sally."

"My—he was in a fright."

"He would be, natural to. A bad job for him."

"Will they put chains on his legs? Oh—poor Martin! And him that gay when he caught you in the dark. Father says they must have had a fearful quarrel about Joan. What'll she do now, Mr Tankervil? They say she'll not live in Harpsfield after this. Father can't work, and when Roger heard

of it he gave a groan and fell almost senseless, and Zeekel Draicot carried him into a cottage. I'll take him some dinner if he don't come home. Mr Tankervil ! ”

“ I'm listening, Sally.”

“ Jim Anscomb denies it. But I know he's guilty, he was in such a tremble all over when they fetched him out. It made me ill to see him—all the ugly side of his face black and blue, and the other white as the grave. They say he got the knife at Thakeam fair on purpose to kill Martin. Joel Wood heard him threaten Martin in their quarrels.”

“ To be sure, they'll get it home to him with circumstantial evidence,” said Mr Tankervil, “ though none saw it done.”

“ What did Mrs Potten say when she ran out screamin' to tell you? Oh—to think it was her should catch Jim red-handed ! What did she say to you, Mr Tankervil? I'll never whisper it if you'll tell me.”

“ Judge and jury must hear it first, Sally.”

“ She can't ever live in that house again ! The police must have left the ferret's box open, for when I looked through the window there the horrid beast was on the hearth, all of a sniff with its nose in the air—my heart went pit-a-pat to see it ! And Miss Treeves was in a temper ; out she darted from her house and abused me.”

“ You'd give her back as good's she sent, I doubt not.”

“ N—o,” said Sally magnanimously, “ I let her off that time, because her eyes were swoll with cryin', and

it would have grieved Mrs Potten to hear us rowin'. They say she's never shed a tear, and hardly spoke a word. I do want to see her. Couldn't I take some of the eggs, and Mrs Tankervil the others?" Sally's bust was quite over the wall in her eagerness—"Mr Tankervil, did she tell you Martin turned her out, and she was in the storm all night?"

"Well, now, what an inquisitive young woman!"

Then the girl wondered where Martin would be buried. "I'll go to his funeral wherever it is. Will Joan be there? My goodness," said Sally, "here's that Mrs Mewett! I'm off round the other way."

Mrs Mewett's sense of dignity would not permit her to look over a retired tradesman's garden wall. The gate swung so noisily on its hinges that it seemed to Mr Tankervil the lady must have kicked it open.

"Oh, good morning, Mr Tankervil."

He lifted his straw hat, and set his pipe on the ground, but went on staking the immature peas.

"Will you be seated, 'm, in the arbour, out of the sun? Or perhaps you're making a call on my wife."

"Oh yes—that is, not now. Ah, how I envy your equanimity," said the lady. "I was utterly unstrung for several hours after I heard of the dreadful crime. One of the servants was so stupid as to tell the Rector, and he went to a window just when they were carrying away the body, with the white sheet trailing on the ground, and that hysterical dressmaker sobbing loudly. The lower orders never can control themselves in public. The whole village is nothing but a beehive of gossip. The Rector is quite unable to leave the house. We had a sincere respect for poor

Potten, and we feel his cruel death as though it were a personal bereavement."

Mr Tankervil felt quite sure that it relieved Mrs Mewett to pour out this rapid speech at him.

"There's others," he remarked, "who'll feel it likewise."

"No doubt. Quite so. You captured the criminal, I understand?"

"I stopped him outside the house. 'If you go away, James Anscomb,' I said to him, 'in I gets in my trap and drives after you, even if it's to the end of the earth.' But he was too scared at what he'd done to run. I had been to Polin in my trap," Mr Tankervil blandly explained, "to visit some old friends. Then to Horsted; and was kept late by the rough weather."

"Yes — so I hear. How terrible that this Anscomb, of all men," said Mrs Mewett, "should be the murderer of the unfortunate woman's husband! How shockingly retributive! I trust she discerns the hand of Providence in this awful event."

"I shouldn't be surprised, 'm, if it was rather the hand of Satan she saw."

"Oh, yes, that may be, in a sense. Quite so! She is staying temporarily with the dressmaker, I understand?"

"So Sally Catmer's been telling me."

"Yes—that obtuse young person is running all over the village. This morbid curiosity is most reprehensible." As Mrs Mewett whirled her parasol from one shoulder to another Mr Tankervil asked himself what else besides morbid curiosity had

brought her to his garden. "The unhappy woman—so it is reported to me—was absent from her home during the night. By the way," said Mrs Mewett, "the police officers, I understand, have questioned Draicot."

"So I gather, 'm."

"Do you know what it was they had to say to him?"

Mr Tankervil shook his head. "I'm standing by from this sad business as much as I can for my health's sake. When I put up my shutters at the old shop for the last time, 'No more worry, Robert,' said I to myself, 'a quiet life now, if so heaven wills it.'"

"A very sensible resolution, Mr Tankervil, and I am sure you have earned repose after your arduous professional career. The Rector and I often speak of the admirable example you give to the village, and I hope you will be one of our churchwardens in the future. Oh—I scarcely like to mention it—but there is a most extraordinary rumour—I sincerely trust it is not true, and you may be in a position to reassure me. It is said that Mrs Potten passed last night in Draicot's rooms at the almshouse?"

"Rumours there's bound to be, 'm."

"Oh, yes. But you must have heard!"

"My wife has, but she hears everything, so it's not necessary true."

"One cannot, even at this distressing time," said Mrs Mewett, "forget what Mrs Potten has been."

"It'll be raked up, sure enough," said Mr Tankervil. "Ain't the soil damp, 'm?"

Mrs Mewett gave him her most astonished stare.

"I would not for a moment suggest, Mr Tankervil, that you are endeavouring to screen this wretched woman. You are a man of high moral character, and therefore must know that under no conceivable circumstances would any respectable woman so compromise herself. A woman possessing a shred of self-respect would rather die than do such a thing!"

"She'd be very foolish, then, 'm, according to my way of looking at it. But the point, where we'll understand it better, is that Mrs Potten seems not to be accounted a respectable woman."

"But she was lawfully married!"

"That didn't bring her to everybody's house," said Mr Tankervil. "Nor me nor my wife can accuse ourselves of casting stones at her, but she never was the same as the others among us, and I've seen ladies look at her in church as if it puzzled them how she got there."

"People cannot help their feelings, Mr Tankervil. I know nothing of her previous life except from hearsay. But her attachment to Draicot has been notorious. She appears not to have made any concealment of it latterly. I am really grieved," Mrs Mewett declared, "not to be able to pay her a call of sympathy. Of course were she to come to the rectory in a contrite spirit the Rector would be obliged to see her officially. But this growing laxity among the common people cannot be countenanced. I am really sorry—but if I were to visit her it would be regarded by the villagers as our condonation of her grievous sin in going to a single man's rooms in the middle of the night. It will be my duty," said Mrs Mewett, "to bring Draicot's

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conduct to the knowledge of Mr Burward. He cannot be permitted to remain at the almshouse after this."

"I hope, 'm, you'll have mercy on Zeekel—and on Mrs Potten."

"Mercy! Yes, we must be merciful. It is a very proper thing in its place. But evil doers must be punished."

"But if Draicot wasn't at the almshouse last night—what then?" said Mr Tankervil.

"Oh, you really must not ask me to believe anything so ridiculous! Apart from his deplorable infatuation nothing is known against him. But he is not a Sir Galahad."

"The police officer that took down my statement," said Mr Tankervil, "told me Mrs Potten was by herself in the almshouse."

"He must be a very credulous and incompetent officer then!" cried Mrs Mewett. "Such a story could easily be invented; and it might not be so incredible were we not aware of her antecedents."

"If I may take the liberty of saying it, 'm, it's not incredible to them that know Draicot. My wife said only the other day she'd think ill of Mrs Potten if she didn't know Zeekel honoured women."

"In any case," said the Rector's lady, "he must have given her some encouragement. No one knows the particulars of the disgraceful intrigue, but it will all be brought to light now. She cannot be so utterly abandoned, after all we have done for her, as to forsake her own home in the night and go to an unmarried man's rooms unless she had reason to believe she

would be welcome. You must give me credit for *some* common sense, Mr Tankervil!"

"It was hardly the sort of night a woman would leave her home without cause."

"No imaginable provocation," said Mrs Mewett, sailing up the path and down again, "could justify such conduct."

"But supposing," Mr Tankervil urged, "Draicot left the almshouse as soon as she got there?"

"That would be rustic chivalry indeed! Mr Tankervil, you are speaking to a woman of the world."

"I don't deny it, 'm. But I had it from the police, that so Zeekel did, and they ought to know, or what are they for? The officer told me his bed hadn't been slept in. Mrs Potten went to the almshouse—I don't want to be harsh on the dead man, poor fellow, but her reason is because she'd not stay in her own home while Anscumb was there—and he says Potten made him come in—so Draicot left the almshouse a minute or two after she arrived there. The police, as I make it out, believe his story, and there's Roger Coe, who's over simple to be trusted in a pack of lies, to back it up. Draicot met Roger in the road after he left the almshouse, before Potten could have been murdered, and the two men were never for a minute separate. They wandered about the whole night, right through the morning to sunrise, and I remember hearing voices at Farmer Windeat's, where they were sheltering, when I passed in my trap. So, 'm, Draicot couldn't have been with Mrs Potten at the almshouse. The police have been to the Squire's gardens, and took down their statements, which I surmise it not to be important

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evidence at all except so far as it serves to protect Mrs Potten from scandal."

"She was certainly at the almshouse!" said Mrs Mewett.

"It's her own admission she was, 'm, and she's never sought to conceal it. She told me herself, and she also asked me if I'd seen Zeekel, as she didn't know where he was. It's positive certain he passed the night in the open with Roger Coe, who was afraid to go to his lodgings."

"It is terrible, terrible!" cried Mrs Mewett in real distress. "Good morning, Mr Tankervil."

CHAPTER XXI

IT was the afternoon of the day on which the coroner held inquest on the body of Martin Potten ; and the red parasol was reflected brilliantly in the clear water as Mrs Mewett and the Rector walked leisurely by the lake in the Squire's private grounds. In the same hour Zeekel Draicot was at work ; he had not been called upon to give evidence. Mrs Mewett lamented to her husband that this splendid place was being wasted ; there ought to be someone to entertain properly at such an adorable old house.

They came upon the Squire hunching his gaunt shoulders before the golden pheasants in their luxurious captivity under the trees. Mrs Mewett exclaimed about the beautiful creatures, and the Squire jolted up his ferocious eyebrows, but made no comment on the lady's enthusiasm. They sat on a rustic seat on the margin of the lake, and talked of fancy pheasants, concerning which Mr Burward was deemed an authority. A boat was moored to the bank ; swans wasted time ideally ; waterfowl glided in and out of the rushes and among the broad dark-green leaves of the lilies ; the air was full of the music of falling water and innumerable birds—and over there, beyond that ridge of forest indefinitely green, in the stable of the Coach and Horses Joan's husband was being nailed up in his coffin. So the Great Mother rejoices over us, whether we go or

stay, whether we fold our hands at ease or clasp them in despair, whether the perplexed little generations of human souls do good or evil. The Squire, at least, accepted the paganism of it. But his manner was unwontedly subdued, almost reverential, as he said :

"The villagers have kept their heads pretty well through this dark business."

"Yes, they are quieter now," Mrs Mewett admitted. "I have been compelled to give some of them a severe talking to."

"They are stunned," said the Rector, "as I confess I was at first. Not one of them seems to be capable of discussing the crime intelligently."

"They are so stupid," said Mrs Mewett. "He is to be buried to-morrow. The Rector will be obliged to officiate. That is the worst of our not having a curate."

"Curates are sometimes useful," observed the Squire. "But you've no daughters."

She smiled at the impertinence ; in anyone but the Squire it would not have been forgiven.

"The police actually wanted to put Mr Mewett on the coroner's jury ! I strongly objected, and explained to the officer—what he ought to have known—that only tradesmen and the middle classes ever serve on such things."

"Potten is to be buried at Harpsfield, I suppose ?"

"Yes—it is a great pity," said Mrs Mewett. "It would have been much better to take the poor fellow to Thakeam or Little Colete. There will be no preventing the villagers from going to gaze morbidly at his grave on Sundays. But I shall have the church-yard gate kept locked."

"They'll look over the wall," said the Squire, "and see his ghost on moonlight nights. We must let them stick to their ghost. An event of this sort brings us to the centre of—" up went his eyebrows—"the centre of something. Nobody knows. But there's always a ghost there."

"If only they understood it," said Mr Mewett, "in your metaphysical sense, Squire."

"Ah, they do, they do; theirs is pure metaphysics; ours is merely gammon about the writing on the wall."

Mrs Mewett was peering through the shrubs by the lake.

"I can't clearly see. Is that—something moving—crawling down there. Is it an animal?"

"Looks like a deformed man," said the Rector.

"A man on his knees at work," said the Squire. "It is Draicot."

"What in the world," cried Mrs Mewett, "is he doing? He seems to be burrowing in the earth like a mole. Is he burying something?"

"Oh, no; he is only preparing the soil for the petunias."

"Ah, your lovely petunias every year! My favourite colour; so bright and cheerful."

Roger Coo was very shaky on his legs as he wheeled the barrowful of top-dressing on to the path by the petunia bed. He sat on a handle of the barrow and rubbed the sweat off his face with his cap.

"I thought you'd want some more, Zeekel."

"I could have managed without it here. There's

that other bed to begin on yet." Draicot broke up a piece of turf. "So you've been at the inquest."

"Yes, Zeekel, in the room where it was. Oh—I've seen Martin—I do wish they'd not put him in the stable."

"Mebbe," said the man on his knees, "he's none the worse for that."

"He looks that beautiful and quiet, Zeekel. Such a heavenly peace on his face, as if he was only asleep. After they put him in his coffin Mrs Potten ast to be left alone with him, before the lid was fastened down, and everybody went out, and she closed the door. When she came out she'd never been cryin' at all, and nobody heard a sound in the stable, but Miss Treeves and Sally wep' awful when they saw her, and Miss Treeves kissed her and took her away."

"She'd be troubled, I doubt not," said Zeekel, his face to the earth.

"She never spoke to anybody," said Roger. "She was only that quiet."

"Ay . . . so they let you in at the inquest."

"Yes; and they'd have let you in as well if you'd wanted to. They never tried to stop me. The room was that full the coroner made them open the windows. He is sharp-tempered; and another gentleman, with one of those high collars up to his ears, was with him, takin' it all down."

"Ay," said Draicot, "them lawyers will have it writ in black and white."

"The jury men were sittin' all round the big table; Jim between two police in a corner."

"He'd give his evidence glib enough, I daresay."

"No, they never put any question to him. What was he there to do, Zeekel?"

"I donno; mebbe to hear it against the day of his trial."

"I couldn't have spoke to him if they'd let me. Will they hang him, Zeekel?"

"They might—if it's proved he did it."

"He was that faint they had to fetch him a glass of water."

"Water'll not harm him. This turf—I doubt if it's been proper rotted, Roger. Who heaped it?"

Roger gazed far away, at the desolation of his own perfect friendship. "Me and Martin. Oh, Zeekel, he'll never heap no more turf."

"Looks like as if it came off the hill pasture," said the man on his knees.

"Zeekel, she was that humble."

"Ay—so you've said."

"But I mean when she was givin' her evidence. They put a chair for her to sit on, and you could hear a pin fall when she took the book for her oath."

Draicot suddenly threw himself back. His mouth worked; he said nothing. He bent forward again to his toil.

"Empty your barrow, Roger."

"Sally burst out sobbin' when Mrs Potten told how she went to her house at daybreak and found Martin dead. The coroner said, 'Who's that young person?' and Sally said, 'Me, sir'; so the police turned her out. My, Zeekel, Mrs Potten is growed that white and thin."

"Empty that barrow! You sit there wastin' time."

"Where'll I empty it?"

"Here." The turf was shot to the ground. "Now help me break it up," Draicot said in a kinder tone.

"That big silent man," said the Squire, "interests me. I had a long talk with him to-day. That's not quite right; I stood by him a long while—and there wasn't much talk on either side. He seems to be absolutely devoid of sentimental feeling in regard to this wretched affair."

"He is so dull," said Mrs Mewett.

"I hardly think dulness is the word for Draicot."

"I have known people," said Mrs Mewett, "get quite a reputation for having something in their heads simply because they never let anything out."

"I would not," said the Rector, "describe Draicot as irreligious; but he is scarcely theologically sound."

"Of course he isn't," said the Squire.

Mrs Mewett twirling her parasol saw the red gleam in the water. "He is still at the almshouse," she significantly observed. "You are aware, no doubt, of that unfortunate woman's having been there."

"Oh, yes. It was just the thing she would do."

"My dear Squire!——"

He repeated the remark; he appeared to have been thinking about this matter. "The man has an extraordinary fascination for me." He turned his eyes to where Zeekel was at work. "I can't induce him to speak about Potten's widow. It's not rudeness. No, nor stupidity. Nor does he seem weighed down by grief or anxiety. It's merely a case of—well, apparently he has nothing to say."

"He really ought to be compelled," said Mrs Mewett, "to give a truthful version of her visit to his rooms that night."

"Suppose there's anything to conceal—wouldn't he lie?"

"Oh, but you are in a position to make him tell the truth."

"I'm afraid you exaggerate my power, Mrs Mewett. And, if he were what's called a gentleman, and found himself in the divorce court—wouldn't he be denounced as a cad if he weren't to lie?"

"My dear Mr Burward, what is expected in a gentleman is hardly expected in a gardener. The intrigue may be equally disgraceful, but there is a code of honour which the common people cannot possibly understand."

"You think there has been an intrigue."

"Oh, plainly!"

"I am not so sure," said the Rector.

"In any event," said the Squire, "it is not the woman only."

Mrs Mewett looked at him inquiringly.

"Not the woman only," he repeated. "I can recognise the ordinary love ferment in a man, and it wouldn't attract me. There's something else in Draicot. I've not noticed it till now; but it may not be new."

Mrs Mewett suggested that he had caught Draicot idling at his work.

"Oh, no; he's a conscientious fellow in that way. It is something that gives him a peculiarly individual atmosphere, as though he had been specialised as a

type by some revolutionary upheaval. You know, I've an eye for types. That Mary Magdalen parson was one, very distinct. Draicot is another, also very distinct. Both belong to humanity, but they are not altogether at home in it."

To Mrs Mewett this sounded extremely absurd. She regarded both types as objectionable. Neither was at all cheerful. Draicot was so bad that his own sister had turned him out of doors. And the Horsted curate was probably tainted with insanity.

"What is singular, too," the Squire went on to say, "his fellow-workmen evidently feel it precisely as I do. Their apprehension of it——"

"I'm getting in a bit of a fog," interrupted the Rector. "What exactly do you mean by 'it'?"

"Ah, now, I should like to know myself. It's the central thing in a human life that makes that life unique. I'm persuaded that if I were to discover what it is in Draicot I should keep it to myself. For this reason—I could only discover it by being—I'll say, where he is. And one may not gaze on the naked soul of one's brother and betray it to the dogs."

"Squire! Squire!" exclaimed the Rector; "what on earth are you saying?"

"I'm poking my nose into the Eternities. What I was about to remark upon is, that although the work-people's apprehension of it may be less intimate than mine, yet they feel instinctively that Draicot has been shuffled apart from them."

"Shuffled?" said Mrs Mewett. "Now you are making out human beings to be a pack of cards!"

The Squire smiled. "They regard him with an indefinable awe, as unimaginative folk do a man who has been condemned to death."

"Don't forget you're a magistrate," said Mr Mewett.

"I don't. That's one of the comic interludes in my career. I've been curious enough to make inquiries, and I find they don't joke with Draicot now. They barely speak to him."

"That is to their credit," put in Mrs Mewett.

"Oh, it's not a question of morality at all. The poor don't give themselves moral airs. For instance, the women who are gathering flints off the fields came a long distance out of their way yesterday apparently for the sole purpose of looking at Draicot; and that tremendous piece of instinctive eloquence had nothing to do with morality."

"Surely," said Mrs Mewett, "it was merely idle curiosity."

The Squire asked if Draicot was really in love with Mrs Potten, and the Rector's wife replied—"It has been the talk of the village ever since we have been here."

"That fellow in custody was an old admirer of hers, I hear."

"Oh, yes; one charitably refrains from speculating as to how many there may have been."

"That tall dressmaker—the woman who makes me feel as though I must be rude in self-defence—she came to see me last night about Potten's cottage, and I told her to tell the widow she can stay there rent free till she gets turned round. Have you heard what she intends to do?"

"They will let her have parish relief, no doubt," said Mrs Mewett. "I have not spoken to her."

"She can't be too well off. I shall send her Potten's wages as usual for a few weeks."

"After all," said the Rector, "I perceive a glimmer of the Christian spirit in you, Squire."

"Her nocturnal visit to the almshouse," said Mrs Mewett, "makes it most undesirable that I should countenance her. I cannot help pitying her; but, if only as a warning to the people, I must make known my disapprobation of her conduct."

The Squire's eyebrows were at their old tricks. "For whatever wrong Mrs Potten may have done, the fates have sufficiently scourged her. Eh?" Then he put it to Mrs Mewett plump: "Do you suggest that it would morally clear the air if I were to turn Draicot out of his rooms?"

She thought it judicious not to meet the question frankly. "I did not say that. There are various methods of punishment. You will naturally adopt any measure you may deem expedient."

"Upon my word, Mrs Mewett, I'm inclined to the opinion that Draicot's behaviour, when Mrs Potten went to him, was rather fine. The blunder he made was in mixing himself up with a married woman."

"It always leads to disaster," said the Rector.

"So it should!" Mrs Mewett exclaimed.

Roger could not work. "Five carriages from Horsted outside the Coach and Horses—never such a sight in my time. And when the inquest was over, they all drove off again—Jim in one of them, all by

himself with two police. The white-handled knife he done it with was on the table before the coroner, him watchin' nobody stole it, because if they did Jim might get off. And Martin's coat and weskit and shirt—all covered with his own blood, Zeekel——"

"Ay," said Draicot, "they'll not overlook much they can lay their hands on." He paused in the act of tearing up a piece of turf. "Mebbe they never questioned her about the knife."

"Yes; and she said she saw it on the table when she left home to go—to go out that night——"

"Say it, say it!" Draicot cried in a loud voice. "Everybody knows where she went. They'll make up their gossip and lies about that easy enough!"

"She told the coroner all about you, Zeekel."

"Oh!—all about——"

"Yes; where she'd passed the night, and you leavin' the almshouse so's she might be by herself. I heard the coroner say to a police, 'Is Draicot here?' and he said, 'No; we never thought his evidence necessary.'"

After a silence: "So that was all they said about me?" Draicot asked.

"All I remember; but there was a lot of other witnesses, some from Thakeam, who had seen Jim and Martin quarrellin' over the knife at the fair. That was the only time Jim spoke."

"So he defended—— What did he say?"

"He said it was false he'd threatened to do for Martin, because it was only in fun."

"Ay, he's fond of his fun," said Zeekel. "I've known him to swear an oath—and break it in fun."

"Mr Tankervil gave his evidence, and the coroner was that cross with him I don't know why; and last of all the doctor. That was when a sick feelin' come over me. I never heard such words before; and what did he say Martin had lung disease for?"

"Oh, mebbe only to show off his cleverness."

"He said the knife went right through Martin's heart, with the point of it broke off on the hearthstone. Zeekel, Jim must have been in a mad fury of murder when he done it."

"I donno! Some of these turfs," said Draicot, "want to be took back and more rotted. Throw them in the barrow. I don't recollect you said what was the verdict?——"

"Wilful murder on Jim. They gave it twice; first a juryman, then the coroner read it out in stately words on a blue paper. He'll never hear me play my concertina again, and he did like a dance tune, to cut his capers round it. Will you go to Horsted to see the black flag, Zeekel?"

"I donno but what I'll be at work that mornin'," said Draicot; "so I hope you'll be as well. You're always havin' your wages docked for short time."

"But I'm going to make a new man of myself after this, and give up the drink. I do believe I'd have perished in the gale that night, Zeekel, if it wasn't for you. Miss Treeves is in deep black; Sally says she's blacker than Mrs Potten herself. Oh—there's the Rector with the Squire and his wife watchin' us."

"They'll not hurt you," said Draicot, "nor me neither. We're but logs of wood to them."

But Zeekel was not a mere log to the Squire. "I should like to know something of his ancestry," he was saying.

"These people," said Mrs Mewett, "have no real ancestors. They marry anyone; and one generation knows nothing of another. If you intend to allow him to remain at the almshouse I do think he ought at least to be cautioned as to his future conduct."

"I could only scold; and perhaps it will be better to leave that to the Rector. I mean to keep him under observation; I want to worm out what it is that has put him in antagonism to his fellows. If he were asked to say I am afraid his explanation would be inadequate. He could, I fancy, translate it into action. I've got so far into him. I don't," said the Squire, "know of anything more pathetic—perhaps I also mean dangerous—than a man of great nature, great unformed mind, great chaotic moral capacity, forced to be dumb and to have his hands tied behind his back in that big cage for refined monkeys we call civilisation."

Mrs Mewett sighed at the dear Squire's increasing craziness. "Draicot is quite ignorant," she protested.

"That may be. But there's something of the Greek tragedy about the man. He has had a peep into the bottomless pit. He is on the side of the Furies. They shun the highly-cultured type, you know."

"Ah, your hobby-horse again," laughed the Rector.

"I'll let you have it so, Mewett. It is true, nevertheless, that the civilised type is incapable of nurturing the Furies; they find nothing there on which to feed

their tearing magnificence of passion. We have an attack of nerves at the very sound of their voices. The Furies require the pure, unrestrained, natural impulses, the free air of the power in us that faces God and defies Him. This power and these impulses are apparently cruel in detail, in a particular instance ; and yet they are terrifically just in the final argument—in the final act."

CHAPTER XXII

IN the dusk of the day after her husband's burial Joan was sitting alone in her house. Her elbow rested on the table, her cheek on her hand ; she was looking at the smoulder of wood-ash in the grate. Her feet were on the bare hearthstone. A small lamp, not yet lighted, was on the table. The window-blind had not been drawn down ; stars were in the pale green light that made the evening seem long for this time of the year.

The outer door opened. There had been no knock. Zeekel Draicot entered.

It was his first visit to her since the night of the storm. His entrance had the simplicity of a child's thought of those who suffer. He stood still for a moment inside the door, and then closed it. Joan sat motionless ; nor had she any welcome for him. Her attitude had the simplicity of a child's thought of death.

"You're sittin' in the dark, Joan."

Her hand gradually moved from her face on to the edge of the table.

"Yes. Miss Treeves has just left me. I might have lighted the lamp."

Draicot stood by the table. She did not ask him to sit down. She did not look at him.

"It's a new lamp you've got, I see."

"Yes; Miss Treeves made me a present of it."

His eyes were not directly upon her, but had she moved even a hair's breadth he would have noticed it. In the silence he knew they were thinking together. And he knew, too, that their minds would not be opened to each other.

"You like to see the stars when they're bright."

"Janet and I," she answered, "have been sitting here watching them come out. We counted them as they appeared, all we could see from the window."

"Them white and gold ones?" he said. He faced the window. "You look that small and shrunk, Joan——"

And now she invited him to be seated.

"I'm wonderin' if I should." A chair was near the fireplace, but if he should sit on it she would see him. "It's a kind gift," he said, "Miss Treeves has give you." Again he was silent, and it seemed to him he could hear her breathing. "You'll be sayin' to yourself I should have kept out of your house."

"I knew you would come," she replied.

"Joan," he said, "because I've stopped away it wasn't through me not thinkin' if you wanted me—" He sat on the chair by the hearthstone. "You've but to speak the word, whatever you'd wish me to do, and I'll do it."

"I am waiting," she said in a hushed voice.

"Waitin', Joan?" He saw the nervous strain upon her lips. "What for, Joan?" She looked at him with eyes of brooding fear. "Miss Treeves is a good friend to you," he said. "We're gettin' the flower-beds ready down by the lake. . . . I went for a stroll to

Horsted on Sunday, Joan." She understood his every word as a supplication. "It'll be a bright starlight night."

"You have been to Horsted?" she said.

"Ay, for a walk by myself."

"Did you," she said eagerly, "see anyone there—anyone you wished to see?"

"Only that preacher—him that gave the sermon the Sunday the rector was took ill."

"And you went to Horsted on purpose to see him?"

"I donno but what I did, now I come to think of it. He's not a man you'd forget easy."

"No, no, he is not! What did you say to him?"

"I never spoke to him."

"But you went to Horsted to speak to him?"

"Mebbe—no, not as much as that; only to see him. Mr Selwyn his name is. I doubt, with the fine service they were havin' in the church where he is, whether it would have been convenient for him to be bothered with a stranger."

"You would not have been a stranger to him," said Joan almost inaudibly. "You would not!"

Draicot took up his hat from the floor. "I'm a disturbance on you, when you want to be quiet."

"I am glad you have come," she said.

"Was you expectin' me, Joan?"

"Yes, yes," she said with intensity. "Will you—are you going again to Horsted?"

"If I do, it'll be to—only to see the preacher."

And then in choked utterance Joan said: "You must speak to someone!"

"Ay," said Draicot, "he's a drawin' kind of man, and it's not a far walk, there and back, on an idle mornin'. So you're advisin' me to go?"

"You might wish to go, Zeekel——"

He was gazing on the floor. "What for, Joan? . . . Wait a minute! I didn't ought to ask you such a question. What's on me is for my own self to bear, and I'll stand to it, not seekin' nobody to share the burden."

"Perhaps someone *must* share it."

"For that, I confess I've had an anxious wonderment since yesterday." His hat fell from his hand; he said as he stooped to pick it up: "Mebbe there's nothin' I could tell the preacher."

"There might be something, Zeekel," Joan whispered earnestly. "And, whatever it was, he would advise you."

"I'm not sure I need advisin'. A man must bide still and firm where he is sometimes, with nobody to come near." He stood up. "But I'll not keep you talkin' no longer." He passed before the window. "I've been considerin' whether I should leave Harpsfield."

She moved round to him.

"Why should you leave Harpsfield?"

"I donno. I'm in the way, it seems."

"*In the way?* . . ."

He approached the table.

"I'm not positive how I mean, to give it in words, exac'y. It's not clear to me yet, an' darker still since I've come to see you. That's as far's I've got. When I opened your door just now, and saw you here by

yourself, 'twas like as if a voice said to me you've reached a haltin'-place where it'll all be different again." His chest heaved. "If it wasn't for you, Joan——"

"Oh, don't think of me! Can you—can you remain where you are, Zeekel?"

He turned to the door. "I'll try to think it over. I doubt I've been in a hurry to see you. I'll not say for why, but it's you that gives me a weakness when I thought I was strong. I've never felt it before nobody else. If it grows plainer with time——" His voice rose: "But I'm in the way here in Harpsfield! I donno if justice'll be done if I stop!"

"Justice?" said Joan—"Justice?"

"Ay, upon them that deserves it!"

Then in an awful whisper she said to him: "Zeekel, would justice be done if you were to leave home?"

"Yes! for then there'd be no fear of me speakin' the word to prevent it!"

"It depends, then, on your silence? . . ."

In a louder voice he cried: "It's justice! Justice on them that blast and ruin human lives!" He lifted up his arm: his shoulders broadened upon the window. "We've waited patient—years we've waited—and now it's come at last! They've made it out so before the coroner and jury. It's justice!—plain justice in this world for once, if there's none elsewhere!"

Joan shuddered, moaned, gazed upon the bare hearthstone.

"Joan, but for you—how you are now—I donno! I donno! It's not as clear to me as I thought it would be. It never happened afterwards the way I reckoned—with me to face you again. But he's come

to it, the law with its fangs on him, and he deserves it!"

"Zeekel, Zeekel! . . ."

"Your fire's goin' out, Joan. I'll leave you; then you can light the lamp for comfort. I'm grateful to Miss Treeves for befriending you. I'm that overthrown in my mind for you, Joan."

"Oh, don't think of me, don't think of me!"

"If you could be left out, nothin' else would trouble me. All that's good in me you've put there; and now it's your goodness that brings me face to face with . . . I donno! I donno!" he cried. "If only I could show you this fire that's consumin' me—in my breast, as if it would burn me up! Yet I'm not all bad, Joan; I couldn't be, my dear, while you've thought kindly of me. Mebbe you've changed now. O my God, what a darkness it is that's come! Joan," he whispered, straining towards her across the table, "if I was to ask you to leave Harpsfield with me——"

"I could not do it!" she said.

"But if we were to go far away?"

"No, no! It is impossible!"

"You say it's impossible, Joan?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I'd do anything for you, my dear. And if we were to be married——"

"I could not marry you!"

"Never, Joan?"

"Never," she said; "never!"

He stood back from the table. "Then I'll not bide here, when you want to be alone." He turned to the door.

"Zeekel—have you nothing to say to me?"

"Nothin' more, Joan." Then with sudden vehemence: "He deserves it! It was him that began all your misery! He's a foul vermin, not fit ever again to cross your shadow, and he broke his oath, and now he'll have to take the consequence of it!" Draicot opened the door, but shut it again, and went behind Joan's chair. "You'll not, I'm sure, be in no fear of me now, if I presume to be so near you. It's you that's conquered, and I'm left in defeat. But only before you, Joan, will my head be lowered in the dust. I do think if you was to end my life it would be that sweet to look in your face while I was dyin'. But nobody else will do it! . . . Don't tremble, Joan; I'll not set my unclean hands on you unless I was to ask your leave first. Mebbe you're right, how you say it's impossible. But, my dear—O my dear, I could kneel down and kiss your feet—only, I'm not worthy even to do that. Joan, I wonder if you'd hold up your hand on your shoulder—just so I could touch it—I'm that famished only to touch your hand, Joan!"

"No, no," she murmured, "you must forget me."

He stood straight behind her chair. "Ay, it grows clearer to me, as you said—that *impossible*. But I'm that troubled for you, Joan, an' I donno what to do. If only there was somethin' you'd bid me do for you. What a small shadowy little woman you look, sittin' there in the dark! . . . Joan, can't you think of nothin' I could do for you?"

"Nothing—nothing for *me*, Zeekel."

"Then for none else!" He moved once more to the door. "He began it—all your unhappiness! He

began it ; and now his long account's been handed in, and he'll have to pay it in full ! ”

“ Zeekel, Zeekel ! . . . ”

“ Oh, ask me anything for yourself,” he cried, “ but don't ask me to lift a hand to save him ! He's not fit to breathe the same air with you ! ” She heard him sigh. “ I'll not say,” he added humbly, “ as much for myself neither.” Then in stronger, almost violent tones : “ But that destroyer of innocence and breaker of his oath—that man with his dog's face !—he'll have to die a dog's death ! ”

Draicot shut the door very softly as he went out.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Squire one day treated Draicot as if he were his head gardener.

"Come with me and I'll show you what I want. We had stocks in this bed last year, I think. It might be filled with asters now, or something else, with a border of that usual yellow stuff you fellows cram in everywhere."

"Pyrethrium," said Zeekel, who like most gardeners mispronounced botanical names.

"Yes, that golden feather," said the Squire, who cared almost nothing for flowers. He watched Draicot take a pot-label from his pocket, rub it clean with the cuff of his coat, write "asters" and "pyreth" on it in pencil, and stick it in the soil. "Where were you educated, Draicot?"

"At Harpsfield school, sir."

"Oh. I don't remember much about you when I was a young man. But I'm getting mixed up in the years; I must be old enough to be your father. This bed," said the Squire, waving his heavy silver-mounted walking-stick over the slope of the lake, "is sheltered by shrubs. It may do for begonias, but don't let them be too crowded. That begonia mob last year on the southern lawn looked as though they were gasping for breath." Zeekel inscribed another label and thrust it into the earth. "Nothing seems to suit that bed over

there ; you can try it with anything you like. Oh, by-the-by, I want you," said the Squire, "to mend a hole in the pheasant run. The wild birds get in and steal their food."

They crossed the rustic bridge over the waterfall, and Mr Burward showed Draicot what he wanted done.

"I hope no one has been throwing stones at the pheasants. This hole is too high up to have been made by a fox."

Zeekel began to unroll the fine wire-netting. The Squire helped him, holding one end of it. Zeekel said he had nothing to cut it with, and the Squire gave him his pocket-knife.

"It hasn't a white handle, this one," he remarked, apparently not looking at the man. "Cut it across there." The knife was being vigorously used when the Squire added : "I should have thought you'd have been called as a witness in that case, Draicot."

"James Anscomb, you mean, sir."

"Yes. Perhaps you're not very much interested in it."

"The police never thought it worth while to summons me, sir."

"No ; they are great asses." He noted the sudden strain upon his gardener's face. "The police may be relied upon to produce everything but the psychology." He knew well enough that Draicot would not understand this word : he was hardly, however, prepared for such utter passivity of manner. "You probably don't quite know what psychology means?"

"I've seen it in print, sir."

"Oh—the inner significance of things. The police

have been laboriously building up a superstructure of evidence on facts obvious to the naked eye ; and that sort of thing isn't very interesting—is it ? ”

Draicot went on cutting the wire. “ It'll spoil your knife, sir.”

“ That doesn't matter. There's more than one blade. It looks,” said the Squire, “ as though the police would prove their case against Anscomb. Eh ? ”

“ Everybody,” said Draicot, “ believes he's guilty.”

“ Yes ; and that's the line the police take. It is occasionally expedient, you know, that a man should die for the public good—even if he is innocent. What did you say ? ”

“ I never spoke, sir.”

“ I fancied—Oh, I suppose you know the suspected assassin was to-day sent by the magistrates for trial at the assizes ? ”

“ My brother Nicholas told me,” Draicot replied.

“ Now hold that end,” said the Squire, “ and we'll give it a stretch. Hullo, don't pull me over ; consider the infirmities of age. How is Mrs Potten getting on ? She had to give evidence again to-day ; I felt sorry for her. But her most trying ordeal will be at the assizes. What she said at the petty sessions wasn't final ; but her evidence at the assizes will decide the issue of life or death for Anscomb.”

“ They all say he did it, sir !——” Draicot's voice was strong and clear.

“ I hope the poor woman will soon get over this shock,” observed Mr Burward. “ She seems weighed down by it more than I should have imagined re-

membering the kind of life her husband led her. But no doubt she desperately loved him all the same. Women," said the old bachelor, "are like genius—the last word can never be said about them."

"There's one word true of Mrs Potten, sir ; she's a good woman."

"She and you are old friends, I believe." And as Zeekel was fastening on the piece of netting : "I've been thinking," added the Squire, "of calling on Mrs Potten to see if there is anything she wishes to say to me." He paused : Zeekel's back was to him. "I don't suppose she is overburdened with friends, and perhaps none of them can do much for her. The Rector and Mrs Mewett seem disposed to stand aloof, and I don't like the idea of the woman being deserted."

"Miss Treeves is friendly with her."

"But she may feel the need of the advice of an elderly man. From all I hear I share your regard for her, and I am afraid there is some trouble on her mind, apart from the loss of her husband—or probably it may be in connection with that—and it might be a relief to her to take me into her confidence."

Draicot's back was still to the Squire ; not for a moment did his hands falter in what he was doing. "She's a woman," he said, "to keep her own counsel."

Mr Burward got closer to him.

"She appeared to-day—I was on the bench, you know—it seemed to me that she had no resentment against the prisoner. On the contrary, her demeanour in the witness-box gave me the impression that she rather pitied the fellow. That's odd, isn't it? seeing she must in her heart have been devoted to Potten."

"I doubt not, sir, Anscomb kep' on declarin' his innocence."

"Again and again. But he is terribly scared."

"Ay, he's a coward, every inch of him!" said Draicot with restrained vehemence.

"Yes; I should think he'll make a miserable exhibition of himself on the scaffold. What was that he cried out when Mrs Potten was telling what she knew about the matter?——"

"I wasn't in the court, sir."

"No. 'You can't believe I'd do it, Mrs Potten.' When he said that I thought she was going to swoon. But she has a sound nerve, and wouldn't even drink the water that was handed to her. Frightful position," said the Squire, "for a woman to be in. Eh?"

"Everybody says it was him that did it, sir—and you've sent him to the assizes."

"We were compelled, on the evidence before us, to do so. Tighten that bit in there. Certainly appearances are against him. But sometimes the police, even in these serious cases, perform a volte face—I mean, all at once discover an entirely different clue; though I'm bound to say I see no hope for Anscomb in that direction. And after all—oh, please turn down those loose ends."

Zeekel scratched his hand, making it bleed; but he appeared not to notice this. "You say, sir, you've no doubt of his guilt——"

"I hardly said that. It would not be fair to him; he must be tried before a jury."

"I beg your pardon, sir, if I mistook you. Those chaffinches up there will wonder when they come to

seek the hole to rob the pheasants again. They've grown that tame, never hearin' the sound of a gun—Mrs Potten would tell the truth, sir, as far's she could."

"Oh, yes. She could have nothing to gain by endeavouring to shield the murderer."

Draicot's body all at once became rigid. The Squire was at his elbow. The silence was broken by a blackbird's shrieking note of alarm as it flew over the heads of the two men.

"We must not," said the Squire, "do Mrs Potten the injustice of thinking that she would in any way colour her evidence, or—or keep anything back."

"He'll be hanged!" said Draicot.

"I daresay, I daresay."

"He deserves it! She's suffered enough from him, and he's never been paid out till now!"

Mr Burward, with a peculiar movement, passed his hand over Draicot's shoulder.

"Let me," he said, "hold this corner of the wire while you secure it. What," he added, "chiefly strikes me is the absence of motive. Men don't kill, as a rule, unless there is something to gain by it; and what end could Anscomb hope to serve by killing Potten? It seems clear that he threatened him with the knife at the fair. But Mrs Potten admits there was no indication of enmity between them when she left the house."

"She was turned out of it, sir, in the middle of the night!"

"Yes; I purposely avoided that circumstance. Then there is the hypothesis that they had a quarrel

in the house. But it is certain that Potten was killed in his sleep."

Draicot's body lurched forward. "I donno!—but they've proved Jim Anscomb did it! Let him stick to his innocence—nobody'll believe him!"

The Squire's chest touched his gardener's shoulder. "Innocent men have been condemned before now. What is that, Draicot," he said very quietly, "on your hand?"

"Only blood, sir."

"Yes; a little blood."

Draicot wiped it off on his coat. The Squire went to the end of the pheasants' cage. "That will do; I don't think the birds can get in now." He left Draicot, and strolled along the bank of the lake.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE sun had gone down when Zeekel, taking Roger Coo with him, left the gardens. They walked home in the slow pace of men who had earned their bread by the sweat of their bodies. It was an evening of melancholy hush, as though nature were dwelling tenderly on her own handiwork, with half-closed eyes. The two toilers had not a word to say to each other until they were in the long plantation that went up from the park near to Parum wood. Then Roger nudged Zeekel's arm.

"There's somebody standin' by the Shaws Barn."

Draicot looked, and saw vaguely a black figure by the gate of the sheepfold.

"Don't speak loud," he said to Roger. "She'll not want to be disturbed in her stroll out in the cool of the day."

"It's Mrs Potten, Zeekel."

"H'sh; this is the hour when noises carry far."

"But what's she doing there?"

"It's the lambs in the fold. Mebbe it's the lambs she's come out to see. She'll find it soothin' to watch them."

"Their bleatin' do sound that sad in the dusk," Roger said.

"Ay," Draicot muttered, "just like as if it was the

ground givin' little cries, not knowin' what for. There's men and women do the same."

"I'm that sorry for poor Mrs Potten, Zeekel. Her all alone there by the sheepfold. When she thinks of Martin I wonder if she sees him how he was on the hearth. She do seem that far away, though she can't be."

"She's far enough away," said Draicot.

"Has she no relations to go to?"

"None. Most of her kith and kin dead, and the others as good as strangers to her."

"She's as bad as me," said Roger. "If I was to find a million pound I'd not know who to will it to."

"Plenty of time to think about that, Roger."

"Zeekel—stop still a minute; I want to see what she's doing."

They stood under a tree; the absorbed sadness of the evening seemed to centre itself in Draicot's eyes. Gradually, unconsciously, as he gazed his lips parted; the distance between him and the sheepfold was annihilated by the intensity of his love.

"Anybody'd think she was a spirit, Zeekel."

"Ay—listenin' to the bleatin' of the lambs."

"I wonder if they can guess she's mournin' for Martin."

"They might be sorry for her," said Draicot, "in their own way. I've noticed when the sun's just sunk down how everything seems to understand you better."

"Zeekel," said Roger, "I lay awake hours wonderin' what was Martin's last dream when Jim did it to him. I wish he'd left me his ferret. It got out of its box, and nobody knows where it is."

Draicot leaned on the tree. "If you chatter that loud, she might hear."

"Is she waitin' for you, Zeekel?"

"No—she don't want me!" He stood off from the tree. "Why should she be waitin' for me? She's in the wrong place for it if she was. I never go by the barn."

"Then it'll be only the lambs she wants to be with, because of her need for company. Zeekel," Roger said in a whisper, "Sally says, when her widow-time is past, very like she'll marry you."

"Your brain bulges with nonsense sometimes, Roger. Sally's as well—and you'll not repeat it, or heed it, from her or anybody."

"But you would marry her, wouldn't you, if she'd let you?"

"Marry her! . . ."

Draicot moved on through the plantation. His love was in all things; in the night that was falling on her; in the ground under her feet. To be near her he could have grovelled among the lambs that were bleating to her.

"Don't look round," he said to his companion; "it's not fair to spy on her."

"No," said Roger. "But what for don't you want to be her new husband, Zeekel?"

"And what for don't you?" said Draicot.

And then Roger tremulously made the boldest avowal of his life so far: "I do believe I would—if she wanted me."

"I donno but she might, some day," said Zeekel, "if you should grow into a genuine man."

"I've never thought of it till you made me," Roger humbly explained. "Ladies don't propose to men except in leap year, and that was last year, and there won't be another for a long while, so I don't think I ought to think about it."

They stopped again after passing through the gap in the hedge at the end of the plantation. Joan was still visible at the sheepfold; and Roger asked Zeekel if he didn't ought to go down and see her home.

"She's come out to be with herself, I've told you."

"Are you not friends with her now?"

"Yes!—of course we're friends." Draicot gazed down. "She's there," he said to himself, "and I donsn't go to her!——"

They went up the hill, and in silence passed through the wood.

The next day was Saturday, and in the afternoon Draicot walked to Horsted. On the way he met Mr Tankervil, driving home, and on being asked what was taking him to the town—"Oh, only for a look round," he replied, "to see the latest fashions in the shops. I'll be wantin' a new neck-tie if they've got one to my taste."

"I'm getting up a subscription gift for Mrs Potten," said Mr Tankervil. "Not in charity, but to show our sympathy. Me and the wife have put our names down for a guinea between us, and Farmer Windeat for half; but that's all the gentry so far," said the old gentleman, his eyes twinkling. "I called at the rectory, but the Rector put me on to his wife, and I'll not divulge the result, for religion's sake. If you want to subscribe now's your time."

Zeekel, patting the pony's flank, said he'd not heard Mrs Potten was in want, immediate; and Mr Tankervil added: "No, but she's in other sorts of distress, and she'll be livened up from our good feeling. Every sixpence set down willing is a love token, and the more the merrier."

"This is the first I've heard of it," said Zeekel; the pony's sleek coat seemed greatly to interest him. "She might not like to see some of the names on your list." He stepped back on to the footpath. "But mebbe you'll not be showin' her the list."

"Oh, yes, I'll read them out to her at the presentation, but not the amounts."

"I'll think about it," said Draicot, moving away.

"She might consider it unfriendly, you not down."

"I'll be takin' the liberty to call on you, Mr Tankervil, some day soon."

He resumed his journey to Horsted. "I've brought her to it," he said to himself—"the door of charity before her, whether it's to be opened by kind hands or harsh." Joan's future, Joan's happiness; that was the problem. "What makes for her peace, how she sees it, that I'll do, whether it's Jim or me. If I was to speak the word to set him free, I donno if she'd suffer less, or more. But it's Jim or me! She never said it, but she brought me face to face with it that evenin' in her house. If it's to be me, it'll be justice from how she looks at it, but not how I do! That's what I can't find my way out of." It had never occurred to him to consider how Joan came to suspect

him. "I've been hopin' to see a new way out, but it don't come. It's not on my conscience like it is on hers. If she was to say to me plain, 'You must give yourself up, and confess you done it'—but that's what she can't bring herself to. For Jim only I'd not suffer; he's vermin to be got rid of. But it would be different if Joan was to bid me do it!"

A man passed: Zeekel returned his salutation, but scarcely recognised him.

"It's far worse for her than me. I do believe them lambs bleatin' made her think of me in Jim's place. It's proof she do love me, her to bear it in silence, waitin' to see what I'll do."

The town was busy, this being the shopping day of the poor. Sister Effie, a woman of property, hardly regarded herself as one of the poor, but Saturday was a day for cheap bargains. The brother and sister met in a by-street; Effie resplendent as usual in black satin and cascades of white lace. The pavement was so narrow, and Effie was so big, Zeekel had to step off to let her pass. He did not suppose she would speak to him. But she stopped, put her back to the window of a bird-stuffer's shop, looked at him with expressionless placidity, and said:

"Never on Saturday afternoon have you come to Horsted with sich a dirty white collar when you lived in my house, Zeekel Draicot."

"I forgot to notice its colour," he replied, just as placidly. "I doubt if I share your taste for pure spotless white, Effie."

"Them old women at the almshouse," she said

"don't need to boast of their laundry skill. The blue's not been wrung out, and they can't make starch. Your photygraph," Effie added, "fell down from its tack on the wall, and the glass's broke in three places. I've consulted in my dream-book, and it means bad luck."

"I donno but what it does, Effie ; I've felt it about me lately as you might be givin' me another shake up in your dream-book."

"What's writ's writ, Zeekel Draicot."

"To be sure, to be sure, unless when it's rubbed out. Well, Effie, if that's the finish of your fresh good news, I'll not keep you."

"Zeekel Draicot," she said, "I hope as how Martin Potten's end will be a awful lesson to you."

"Ay," he replied.

"Us Draicots," said Effie, "have always for ages been respectable till now."

"If you'll behave to Nicholas," said Zeekel, "I donno but what, with him and you, there'll be a respectable remnant of us kep' goin' a while."

"I've locked up your broke photygraph in a drawer," said Effie.

The globular mass of black satin and white lace rolled on. "She leans heavy on her family pride," Draicot said to himself, "and I hope when she needs it next time it'll not crumble under her." He made his way to the extreme north of the town, where, on the slope of a lovely downland range, the county gaol was situated.

He stood looking up at the high gloomy walls and the innumerable little barred windows. Supposin' Jim

was at one of them, could he see down here? Zeekel was untouched by the smallest feeling of pity for the prisoner. He felt towards him at this moment an intenser hatred.

He had a cup of tea and a piece of bread and butter at the Queen Caroline eating-house. The prison was focussed in the window of the room, and it seemed to Draicot that prisoners with long sight might be able to make out these Scripture texts. The proprietor of the eating-house would be a religious man; but that fine-dressed young woman at the counter out there had inquisitive eyes. As he ate his bread, standing by the window in order to see more of the huge pile on the face of the hill, he thought it looked a tolerable safe place to be in for a long rest. That was the big gate, with a tower over it and a pole where they ran up the black flag at eight sharp; ivy growin' up the wall, like on the old church at home.

And Jim in there. . . .

The ivy was near the top of the tower, and would be round the pole soon.

Draicot wandered about the town for two hours; but he did not buy a new tie. He paid sixpence for a toy to take to the child of the Squire's lodgekeeper, an engine gaudily painted, with real wheels, though they might have kept straighter when it ran. He went back thrice during the two hours to look at the gaol. Twice, on seeing it, he was seized with a surcharge of rage. But on the third occasion his mind was almost neutral, his step being less strenuous, his face of a dull grey colour. For remorse, the realisation of the sanctity of human life, the breaking power

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that was distinct from his love for Joan, was beginning its work upon him.

Twilight was falling on the town when he stood outside a huge basilica-like building in the poorest quarter.

CHAPTER XXV

THIS was the church of the minister who had made the people of Harpsfield think about Mary Magdalen. The entrance to it was down a long passage, at the end of which was a swing door. The brick floor of the passage was very uneven, and Draicot seemed to stagger on it. He stopped before the notices of services affixed to the wall. He was not reading them, but listening for a sound in the church. It appeared to be empty; all was silent. Yet from the street he had seen a faint light at a high window.

And then people began to come out through the swing door: two poor women; then a florid young lady with a bounding walk like Miss Treeves'; and then an old clergyman and a sister of mercy smiling to each other but apparently not saying anything. Nor did Draicot speak to them. He continued to linger at the door.

He felt like one in sanctuary, the sanctuary to which a man takes something, not the refuge of abject self-pity. Had Joan been with him, holding his hand, leading him, he would not have hesitated, save perhaps to say, "If it's your way of justice, my dear, I'll do it." But Joan was not there; and he did not think of her.

When at last, with his knee and elbow to the door, he was about to push it open a little way and peer

in, it was pulled gently from within, and another sister of mercy was before him. He stood aside, and waited till she was gone, as though ashamed to be seen going into the church. But she turned in the passage, and looked at him; and then he asked her if she knew where Mr Selwyn was to be found.

"Yes, he is one of the clergy of this church."

"He's mebbe at home," Zeekel said.

"No, he is hearing confessions."

She went away. Her words summed up to Draicot all that was in Joan's mind. Of penance as a doctrine he knew nothing; but "Joan's way" was becoming clearer to him. It gave him something of the mood of august resignation in which the inward gaze is calmly fixed on atonement. He went very quietly into the church.

It was dimly lighted, and appeared to be empty. There were no seats at this end, only a wide space of bluish brick floor, and against the opposite wall Draicot noticed what seemed to him a partition with short black curtains before it. His impression was that someone was there; but he saw no one. The floor looked shiny and slippery.

Zeekel, still just inside the door, let his eyes wander through the church. It seemed ever so much bigger and more solemn than when he was here before for the service. What would that pink light be—hanging there like a great ruby in mid air? There were flowers on the Communion table, and tall candles, and a gleaming cross. And this would be the smell of incense, just like the smell of Parum wood in

the fall. That ruby light had an awesome, living look, and the stillness of the church was queer, in the heart of the noisiest part of the town.

And then the young priest, wearing cassock and biretta, came stalking across the cleared space. His appearance was so sudden that Draicot had not perceived whether or not he emerged from behind the short black curtains.

"Do you wish to speak with anyone?"

"I donno as I do, sir, partic'ler." Draicot turned to the door. "I was only passin' and looked in."

"Oh, yes. Please don't go away if there is anything I can do for you. Perhaps you would like to see another of the clergy?"

"I'm a stranger to them, sir."

"Oh, that doesn't matter at all. If you wish to see one of them I'll send for him at once; they are all at the clergy-house, next door. Don't go away if——" Mr Selwyn drew nearer to him; Draicot was conscious of an influence like Joan's upon him when his love for her was at its purest. "You may say anything to me, you know."

"You'll not reckonise me, sir."

"I seem to remember you. I'm sure I've seen you somewhere. Please let me have a good look at your face——" He held his hands under Draicot's elbows. "I shouldn't think," he said, smiling gravely, "that physical fear is your besetting weakness. Were you in our church the other night?"

"I'm a Harpsfield man, sir."

The young priest shook his arms in the brotherliness that does more than many sermons. "Thank

God," he said—"thank God I caught *one* of you that afternoon! We've so many failures, you know, and I'm afraid I am rather easily depressed; our vicar tells me this is due to intellectual vanity—and so it is very cheering to find now and then that someone remembers."

"You preached at me, sir."

"At you?—"

"I've wondered whether you did," said Draicot.

"Oh, yes, of course I spoke to you all. If anything I said went straight home—to you, to anyone—I am very glad. And sorry too," Mr Selwyn added. His hold on Draicot's elbows became firmer. "Is it necessary for me to say that, in your case?"

"Not exac'ly in the way you mebbe think, sir. Not how you put it about her betrayers." Draicot looked over the young priest's head; here, for the first time in his life, was a man whose eyes he could not frankly meet. "Your sermon gave it different from others—how to treat Mary Magdalen——"

"Was she in the church at Harpsfield that afternoon?" The priest's hands fell to his sides. "I recall you now. You were sitting behind a woman—a woman whose face I can't forget." Mr Selwyn paused. "Were *you* thinking of that woman as I preached?"

"I donno if I was the only one that did, sir."

"Ah, how wonderful! I saw her tears and I knew they were not altogether tears of pain. She looked up at me through them, and I felt that the angels rejoiced. I never preach about Mary Magdalen but I see tears in some woman's eyes, and often in the eyes

of men also. How strange and wonderful that is—the Magdalen always in our midst—and thanks be to God it is given to some of us to recognise her! But,” Mr Selwyn said in a changed tone, “I have no remembrance of—of that kind of look—in your face.”

Draicot shifted his feet awkwardly. He took from his pocket the toy engine he had bought for the lodge-keeper's child. He ran it over the palm of his hand, smiling faintly.

“For your little boy?” the priest asked, not at all offended at the sudden break in the conversation.

“No, sir, I'm thinkin' I'll be a childless man to the end now.”

“Have you lost—perhaps you are a widower?”

Draicot did not answer the question. “It's for a tiny little gell that's partial to me, I donno why. I've known her to cry for me to give her a ride on my back.” He abruptly returned the toy to his pocket.

“Won't it get injured if you don't wrap it up?”

“I have the paper here; I took it off on purpose. It's like feelin' her little hand in mine, to touch the engine she'll be that proud of. And so, sir, you guessed her from her face?”

“Is she—you are her friend?” Mr Selwyn asked.

“I've thought I might be,” Draicot replied; “but I'm not sure if I'm a bigger stranger from her now than from you, sir. I was only passin', and you came in my mind, so I looked in. You've a beautiful fine church here, sir.”

“Yes. Now, if there is anything I can do for you, don't, I beg of you, go away without telling me. There is sad trouble in your village, I hear.”

"Ay, he was her husband."

"The man in custody?"

"No—him that's dead." And now Zeekel Draicot steadily met the priest's gaze. "Him that's been murdered," he said. He glanced across to the opposite wall; those small dark curtains seemed to fascinate him. "Is that the place where they go to confess, sir?"

"Yes."

"Only to you. It's only you that hears?"

"And God," said the priest.

"Ay, Him," said Draicot; and now he appeared stupefied. "There'll be some, I daresay, that finds it burdensome—this or that—what they've done—to keep it on their minds."

"Sin is a heavy burden," said Mr Selwyn.

"Ay," said Draicot, "sometimes you're forced to face it—not only how you see it yourself——"

"We can never see sin as it is," said Mr Selwyn, "from our own point of view. You are really sure I cannot help you?"

The church for a moment held a great silence.

"I've my doubts, sir, if you could, though I believe you're the one, if anybody. I was only passin', and looked in."

"Confession," said the priest, "is an absolute necessity of fallen humanity."

Draicot put his hand on the door. "You've got a stiff swing to it, sir. There's one in the Squire's hall, only not as stiff's this." He grew more and more dazed. He pushed the door two or three times, like a child filled with wonderment at inexplicable

mechanism. "Now supposin', sir, a man, counted for a murderer, was to come in here. I'm only supposin' it, sir—Jim Anscorb'll not come, him bein' safe up there in the prison—but what would you say?——"

"To the murderer?" Mr Selwyn's face was become intensely spiritualised.

"Oh—but Jim—he's not the one to darken your door even if—even if he was free to do it. But supposin' a man was in a fix, of his own doin' in one way, yet not his own to get out of it—and he sought guidance——"

"I should point him to the only Guide."

"I believe I understand what you mean, sir."

Then said Mr Selwyn—

"Come this way."

He took Draicot's arm. They moved along by the wall, till they came to an alcove, and the priest and the assassin stood before a calvary. Mr Selwyn removed his biretta.

"There is the Guide—the only Guide."

Draicot gazed.

"Blood on His head."

"The crown of thorns," said the priest.

"An' on His hands and feet."

"The print of the nails. We are murdering Him every day!" cried the priest.

Draicot gazed. "His eyes closed——" And now he resolved to keep his terrible secret. "He do look that dead, sir."

"No, no, no! He is the only *living*, eternal Reality of which the world knows. It turns away, but it cannot escape *that*; it cannot get away from *that*."

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Draicot held his breath. It seemed to him that the vast spaces of the church echoed with his own heart beats. He retreated to the door.

“ I was only passin', and thought to——”

He went out suddenly.

CHAPTER XXVI

THREE unusual visits were paid in Harpsfield on the last Sunday in June. Miss Treeves was so surprised to see the Squire at the door that she performed an incipient curtsy. He said, "You're the woman I'm hunting for;" and straightway Miss Treeves' respect for persons was at an end. He entered, took the chair which she gave him with frigid dignity, and asked her how Mrs Potten was getting on.

"She is well in health, sir."

"And in mind?" prompted the Squire.

"I cannot endorse the suggestion," said Miss Treeves. "Mrs Potten has proceeded with my parents for open-air exercise. They will presently return."

"You needn't be afraid of me," remarked the Squire. "What does Mrs Potten say about Anscomb?"

"Nothing," said Miss Treeves.

"And what does she say about having to give evidence at the assizes?"

"Nothing at all."

"And what does she say about Draicot?"

"Absolutely nothing!"

"And how is Draicot behaving in the village?"

"His conduct," said Miss Treeves, "is utterly irreproachable."

"Does he still come to see Mrs Potten?"

"He does not, sir! To the best of my belief Mr Draicot has only once spoken to Mrs Potten since her husband's death."

"But he used to be often with her. What did they get to talk about?"

"A variety of subjects, I presume. A clean-minded man can say any mortal thing to a woman and not offend her."

The Squire got up. "Tell Mrs Potten I shall be calling on her shortly. She must go on as she is until after the trial at least. Does she speak about visiting Anscomb in gaol?"

"In the name of wonder!——" Miss Treeves stared at her visitor, and he bewildered her still more with a series of eyebrow hieroglyphics. "If she were to mention such a thing I should conclude she had taken leave of her senses!"

"Aha, you see," said the Squire, "I am such a greenhorn where you women are concerned. And how's your mother's heart?"

"The liquid stimulant you were obliging enough to send her," said Miss Treeves, "did her a considerable amount of good."

"I'll send her some more. Take a drop yourself."

As Mr Burward was leaving one house, sister Effie was approaching another. She knocked at the front door of the almshouse; but one of the old pensioners was asleep, and the other was deaf. For two or three minutes Miss Draicot stood facing the door. Then she knocked again, and now Zeekel appeared.

"It's you, Effie."

He stood aside to let her in, but she said placidly :
 "The shoulder o' mutton I had for dinner was extry fat, and I'm hot from walkin' in these new boots made to measure at Thakeam, sixteen shillin' the pair ; but not an inch over this doorstep shall they carry me, if I'm punished with cramp for it."

"I'm makin'," Zeekel enticed, "a cup of my special tea, and you're welcome."

But the mass of black and white would not stir. "I've had a fresh night-vision about you, Zeekel Draicot, and the book says it meant a visit. I considered whether I should come to you or where ; and so I dressed, and it led me here. But put my head under the roof of a charity-house I never shall. Us Draicots have always been respectable till now."

"What a domineerin' dream-book," said Zeekel, "to send you to my pauper-place only for a sniff of it."

"It's come to my ears that you've so forgot your family pride to give that picture to Janet Treeves."

"I'll not deny it, Effie."

"And I've thought as you might demean yourself and us to give the family Bible to Joan Potten. What for do you laugh, Zeekel Draicot ?"

"I was only smilin' to myself, Effie."

"Then tell me plain, are you goin' to marry Joan the widow ?"

"I've a notion," he replied, "she'll not be my wife this side Chris'mas. So there's time for a lot more visions under your nightcap when your supper don't agree."

"It's borne in on me," said Effie, turning her back upon him, "as I'll never speak to you again in this world."

"Mebbe that's true," Zeekel replied, watching her go down through the garden.

It was after the evening service (at which the Rector had shouted a sermon from the text, "I shall go softly all my years in the bitterness of my soul"), that Sally Catmer from a safe distance followed Joan to her home. For Miss Treeves was with Joan. Sally hid behind the wall in the lane till they parted, and then went down the paved path, crouching under Miss Treeves' window.

"May I come in, Mrs Potten?"

"Yes, of course you may, Sally." Joan was taking off her hat and mantle. "Why haven't you been to see me for so long?"

"Because that Miss Treeves is always on the prowl to cop me. She's jealous of everybody except her own self when they want to show they're sorry for you."

"I don't think," said Joan, "Miss Treeves would willingly shut me out from people's kindness."

"Oh, Mrs Potten, I do loathe the ground that woman trods on!" Sally had taken a thimble from her pocket, and was polishing it on her sleeve. "I've never forgive Miss Treeves for the names she called me, because I couldn't help it when poor Martin——"

"You must forget all about that," said Joan.

"She was only wild from him never wantin' to kiss her." Sally breathed on the thimble and began rubbing it again. "I've known him ever since I was a little

mite, and he carried me home once when a cow kicked me. He held me in his arms like an infant, and I cried when he set me down at our garden gate, because I wanted to be carried a lot more."

"Yes," said Joan.

Sally held up the thimble to the light; it was very bright now, and she was sure it must be real silver with a gold skin inside.

"Now you are here, you must stay to supper with me, Sally."

"Oh, Mrs Potten, that's the first time you've asked me, and me to think you despised the sight of me."

"No, no," said Joan. "It was not always convenient for me to ask my friends."

Sally was contemplating the case of stuffed creatures. "Zf I don't know what you mean. That night he made me and Roger come in, though you'd gone to bed, I've shook hands with myself offen and offen for behavin' so's you'd have no grudge against me. Everybody knows poor Martin would never have done it only when he was in the drink. My, if he'd always been to you like he was to me when he carried me home. I was only in short frocks then, and my hair curled the same as Miss Treeves', though I've not kept it up from vanity like her."

"That is a nice thimble you have," Joan said.

Sally held it up to her. "Didn't you ever miss it? Real silver, too. I've looked at it, and put it on all my fingers a hundred times since he—since he was dead, and felt I couldn't give it up. I wanted to confide with somebody how I should do, but the neigh-

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bours tell everything as soon's you trust them, and when I'm in difficulty I can't bring back mother to advise me."

"Perhaps I can give you advice, my dear," Joan said, putting an arm round the girl.

"Don't you know it, Mrs Potten?"

"This thimble?"

"Yes. It's yours."

"Oh, no, you must be mistaken; I have never had a silver thimble."

Sally sank into a chair. "Well, now, there," she said disconsolately, "'zf I've not been worrying myself he must have stole it from your work-basket."

Joan, a little coldly, repeated that it did not belong to her. She stirred the fire and put on the kettle. "I didn't notice Mrs Mewett in church," she said. "The Squire was there; I have not seen him in church before."

But Sally was not interested in Mr Burward's devotions. "Now I do wonder how he come by it, if it's not yours."

"You need not bother about it," said Joan. "It is best to be silent and charitable regarding many things. If I were you, I should keep it, and not tell anyone who gave it to you. Have you spoken of it to anyone yet?"

"Not a born soul but you, Mrs Potten."

"Then please don't. Put it in your pocket, and say nothing more about it. Miss Treeves may be coming in to have supper with me, or to ask me to go in to her house. I spend a good deal of my time there now, you know. Oh, you need not go away."

"That long woman," said Sally, "she'd choke blue to sit at one table with me."

"No, no," said Joan, smiling.

Sally helped her to lay the cloth. "There never was no more than nonsense between Martin and me, Mrs Potten. I didn't ought to have let him be so free, but he had a way of throwin' you about before you knew where you was. Always when he did it I said to him, 'Martin Potten, you've got a true wife of your own,' and many's the time I've smacked him and scratched when he'd not stop. There, I've offended you!"

"You have not offended me, Sally."

"Well, I'm glad. Then I'll speak about Zeekel Draicot, and that'll brighten you up. They say he'll never marry Miss Treeves, nor nobody else, so they needn't make tracks for him till you're dead. My, this is a chair; ours just like it. I'm always at that shuffle-breeches of a Roger to mend ours. Oh, I forgot to tell you, Mrs Potten, I've picked up a new young man, and I don't believe you could guess his name. He's a Thakeam man, but he don't belong there from birth, only to work for the railway. He sells the tickets when you go by train, and you'd know him from his white face and trousers always turned up, wet or dry. One night Zeekel caught me with him, and wanted me to go home; he's the most provokin' man for interferin' with anybody's sweethearts. I wouldn't mind if he wanted me for himself, but he don't, and he only says I get hold of the wrong ones. If I could have my own husband by choice I'd have Zeekel. He vexes me when he interferes, but afterwards I

think he must care for me or he'd not. Father don't, nor nobody, and, oh my, if only Zeekel was my brother!"

"He has the nature of the elder brother, Sally," Joan said in subdued tones.

Then Sally whispered: "Mrs Potten, if I was struck dumb for sayin' it—I'm in love with Zeekel! Oh, what for do you shiver?"

"The evenings are still a little cold," said Joan.

"I am, Mrs Potten, and I don't care if you tell him—but you won't—and don't tell anybody else! Everybody says he's waitin' till your second turn is ready: and what a handsome couple you two'll be walkin' out together!"

"I must ask you," said Joan, "not to speak of this."

"If he gets you," said Sally, "I'll not have a morsel of envy, like I would if it was Miss Treeves. Father says you're bound to be Mrs Draicot, after Jim Anscomb's been hanged."

"Sally, Sally!——"

"I know it's early to plan it out, but there's no sense carryin' your widow-weeds to the grave, when you can't bring back them that's been took first."

Joan could bear it no longer. "Listen," she said, rising, "was that a knock on the wall? Miss Treeves signals to me sometimes, and I reply." Joan took one of Martin's walking-sticks, and knocked on the wall. The signal was returned.

"If she comes in don't say what I told you about the silver thimble! She might swear it's hers."

Miss Treeves entered. She gave Sally a scornful

glance. "What," she demanded in her loftiest fashion, "are *you* doing here?" She threw open the door. "I am abundantly persuaded that your nauseous intrusion into this house is undesired and undesirable."

"Oh, no, Janet," said Joan.

"Huh! her big words!" Sally laughed uncomfortably."

"I don't for an instant insinuate," said Miss Treeves, "that your so-called mental faculties are capable of comprehending the English language."

And now Sally straightened herself for battle. "You're a selfish, spiteful old maid, Janet Treeves, and you've only been at Harpsfield school like me, and your paper curls'll be wore out if you wait till Zeekel Draicot marries you!"

"Now, now, Sally, that will do," Joan said with some severity; "I don't like to hear my friends talk nonsense when they come to see me. I am sure you don't mean to be rude to Miss Treeves. But perhaps," Joan added pacifically, "we shall have a nice chat about something else the next time you call."

Sally made for the door. "I can take an 'int, Mrs Potten," she said rather tearfully. Then she flashed out at the dressmaker: "You'd jump in your shoes to know why I came, but you won't then!"

Joan appealed to Miss Treeves: "I should be so pleased if you would shake hands with her."

"I?—"

"Look how she gasps, 'zf I want her to!" cried Sally.

"Don't be so incurably ignorant," exclaimed Miss Treeves; "and go and buy a penny book of etiquette!"

"I'll lend it to you if I do, Madam Costumeer! Good-night, Mrs Potten."

Joan went with the girl into the lane. As she returned: "I'm afraid, Janet," she said, "the Rector's sermon on 'going softly' has not done us much good."

CHAPTER XXVII

JOAN spent an evening, in the week before the assizes, with Mr and Mrs Tankervil; and when she left the old gentleman wished to "see her home," but she thanked him, pointed to the beautiful moonlight night, and said it was not necessary for him to go out.

"No one will molest me," she added, smiling.

"A nice little stroll," said Mrs Tankervil, kissing her, "will do you more good than his chatter about gardening. I'll send you a little trifle in the morning, or bring it myself."

No woman in Harpsfield had her hand against Joan in those days. Even Mrs Mewett's hostility had ceased. And the Rector did not make so much noise now when he called upon her.

Joan was on the road, by the low grey wall of Mr Tankervil's garden, when a figure emerged slowly from the shadow of the trees, a figure like a shadow, too, though she knew it to have the iron vigour of Zeekel Draicot. As he drew nearer to her she perceived that he was carrying something under his arm. She stood by the wall, which just came up to her shoulder, and he also stood still a few paces from her.

"It's you, Joan."

"Yes."

He advanced, and stopped before her. For a

moment neither spoke, but looked at one another, and yet not into each other's eyes ; and both were saying to themselves, "Next week, Horsted assizes . . . " The moonlight was upon them, and the stillness and solitude of the night, and the greater stillness and the deeper solitude of their own unfathomable pain.

"You'll be out for a walk, Joan."

"I am going home," she said.

He turned his side to her. It seemed to him there was nothing left to say. She looked one way, towards the wood, and he another, towards the pond, on which the swan was lost in the silver shine. All at once a nightingale poured out its fiery song upon them from Mr Tankervil's garden.

"'Tis a pleasant, quiet hour for a walk," said Zeekel ; "the moon almost at full."

"Yes. I have been spending the evening with Mr and Mrs Tankervil," Joan replied, as though some explanation were due to him. "They asked me to take tea with them, and I have just left."

"They're friendly disposed folk," said Draicot. "I might be botherin' Mr Tankervil myself one of these days soon now for an obligation. He'd not say no, if he could do it ; and for all his ramblin' tongue, he's to be trusted, from his goodwill of spirit."

"Are you, too, going for a walk?" Joan asked him.

"Only as far's Effie's. She goes early to bed, in the old style of the Draicots."

"I won't detain you, then. Your sister has sent me a kind message by Nicholas, asking me to visit her when I have an afternoon to spare."

"Ay," said Zeekel, "wonders'll never end with Effie after this. I heard it from Nicholas, and then she grew to be a young sister to me again, like time fleein' back on a sudden. That's why I'm takin' her this, a peace-offerin' to make up our difference, if she's agreeable to meet me for a while."

"For a while, Zeekel. What do you mean by that?"

He still stood gazing away to the shining sheet of water in the heart of the village.

"I'm in doubts if it'll last," he said.

"What is that you are taking to your sister?" Joan asked.

"Oh, only the ancient family Bible."

"Why are you taking it to her?"

He moved round, as if to listen to the nightingale. After a pause he said: "Effie sets great store by it, from the names writ out in our long history, every one, she'll tell you, an honest man and woman till now. . . . Seems as if that bird is thinkin' of you, Joan——"

"But why are you taking it to your sister?"

"Oh, she only said, when I was done with it, then by rights it should fall to her. She'd be that miserable if it was to go to strangers. When father was laid up for the last time he said to me, 'It's yours, Zeekel; then descended to your biggest son.' But as I donno whether he'll be born in a hurry, Effie'll look after it, first for herself, and then Nicholas, and them that come after him."

Joan's body sank in upon the wall. The moonbeams touched only her head and shoulders now. Again she asked him, in tones that made him feel he

was before a judge who would be merciful but durst not, why he was taking the book to his sister.

"I've told you, Joan."

"You have not told me all," she said. "Why are you giving it up, Zeekel?"

Her persistency put him in chains of silence.

She said: "Tell me. Tell me the truth. Oh!—oh!—something must be done!" she cried.

He removed the book from under his arm, and held it in both hands. It was then that their eyes met; and suddenly Joan closed hers, and leaned her elbow on the wall.

"I'm settin' my house in order," Draicot said. "Nobody knows what might befall a man in alms-house lodgin's." He paused. "This is Tuesday in the last week before the assizes."

"The last week . . ." said Joan.

A listener might have thought they were like children prattling of the things that did not matter.

"They're fixed for Friday," said Draicot. "The assizes," he added, "when Jim Anscomb takes his trial."

"Yes," said Joan in a whisper, "and if nothing is done, he will be condemned! . . ." She weakened; all her frame seemed to crouch—collapse. She was like a blur on the wall. "The time is swiftly passing," she murmured. "The day will soon be here——"

"Ay; that great day for Jim. Joan, Joan," he said; "it's as though I had struck you where you stood, and you couldn't bear the blow, nor me to see you."

"I can't bear it much longer," she replied, her face scarcely visible to him.

He set the book on the wall. "It might," he said, "happen before the time."

She raised herself, and again the moonlight was on her face. "What might happen, Zeekel? . . ."

Then he leaned on the wall close to her. "Joan, I'm feelin' that broken——"

He looked over the wall. She drew nearer to him. He turned his head, and it was bent over hers. They breathed upon each other, afraid to utter the word that would part them for ever. "Joan, I could pass through it if you was to be with me!——"

"I can't be with you," she said. "It seems to me that you are far away from me—even now. And yet, if I could, I would go with you."

"Anywheres, Joan?"

"Anywhere to atonement," she said. "Anywhere! Anywhere!——"

His arm went round her. She did not shrink from him; he saw no dread of him in her gaze. He pressed her bosom to his breast. "If we could end it together—you and me, Joan——" Even then she had no fear of him. He held her with both arms, in the love of the living death, the love that was stronger than death, the love that almost purified the sin of Cain, yet could not escape from its retribution. "It's not with you—toward me—like I thought it would be, Joan." He released her: for this was the final revelation of the awful futility of his crime—that he had also killed the body of her love, as woman loves man, and it could never be brought to life again.

They stood apart, and the book was on the old grey wall between them.

"I've lately had a notion to ask you, Joan, to show me that chapter the Horsted preacher gave out in his sermon. I wonder if it's clear enough, with that bright moon up there, to read this big print. And another notion came in my mind only a little while ago, when I was sittin' in my easy-chair, and heard a step outside." His gaze was on the ground. "Mebbe it was a coward notion, but I'll tell you. It was when I heard the step, I thought if it should be you come to bid me do it. Then queerer it grew in my mind, you tappin' on the window pane outside——"

"I was not there, Zeekel."

"No, it was only the notion in my head. You gave three plain taps on the window while I sat there by myself. I'm only supposin' it, Joan. Three taps—I donno why three. Then I understood what it meant."

"What did you understand?——"

"As how I was to go to Horsted," he replied.

"Go to Horsted? . . ."

"Ay—and take Jim's place. I'd do it, Joan, for you. Joan! you'll be faintin' out here if I don't stop my torment of you!"

"No, no," she said.

"There's a feebleness in me—unless it should be something else—that wants you to say it plain, so's I'd know 'twas for you. I do believe it's my love for you makes me ask you, because if you said I was to do it, 'twould be different from my own surrender, and easier for you pointin' the way, and I might keep up

the notion how you had gone with me, Joan, even *there*. But I never thought to tell you my fancy, lest you should blame me for a coward heart, and knowin' likewise what you've to bear already."

"I can bear more," she said.

"Then you might like so to give me the signal, with the window between us, and the blind down when you done it—for I doubt if I could stand to it like a man, me and you face to face."

"We are face to face now, Zeekel——"

"But don't say it, Joan! I'm that poor-spirited when I see you—what I've brought you to—and I can understand it's for me to act how you advise—yet somehow I want your clear message come to me when I could be still, like you always are, and not make a mean show of myself before you."

"Three taps," she said—"on your window?——"

"Ay, if you was to do it to-morrow night by ten o'clock, or an hour before, I'll be there to lissen. You'll think about it till then, and what you decide on I'll obey. If you want my faithful promise——" He held out his hand: she did not take it. "Joan, O my dear, if only I could give up my life and bring Martin back to you!"

He faced the wall, and put his hands on the Bible.

"Zeekel, Zeekel, don't think of me. You must let me pass out of your thoughts for ever now. You can't repent by doing it only for me!"

"I'm comin' to see it how you're in the right, Joan. It's when I consider my lack of power to undo what's been done . . . That nightingale sings joyful for you, Joan, and I hope it means brightness in your future

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. . . You'll not be ashamed for my manhood if I'm bid to pay the penalty ; but I can't be the hypocrite to say I'll be glad to let Jim off. He deserves it if it was to be him."

"Zeekel, Zeekel !——"

He opened the book. "I've turned and turned, but can't find the preacher's place. Easy to read in this white light. I came across her name in Matthew, but different from how he gave it out in his sermon."

"It is in St John's Gospel," said Joan ; "the second last chapter."

"Well, there, and I searched John through, then the Acts, and on to the end. I thought I might as well have a read before givin' it to Effie for a keep-sake."

Joan turned the pages. "That is the place, Zeekel."

He looked. They were standing shoulder to shoulder before the book, the wall as reading-desk, the moon for light.

"So 'tis, and me to miss it. Could you see to read, Joan ?"

"Yes, Zeekel. *The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalen early, when it was yet dark.* . . . It is all on this page, Zeekel. Have you been again," she asked, "to see the young clergyman who came to Harpsfield ?"

"Ay, when I was passin' I looked in."

Joan breathed the question : "What did you tell him ?"

"For that, only a little talk. I've been thinkin' he might be comin' to see me by-and-by. He's the one

to come, quick ; I do believe the worse you was the sooner he'd meet you half way."

"Yes, yes," said Joan.

Draicot was standing behind her.

"If I'd remembered what he preached, then—that night you was drove from home, and came to the almshouse in the storm—Joan, I'm in a inward gale myself, to see how my voice is like strokes on you, yet you not to complain. If you'd lean back on me for support. It's that strange, when it's borne in on me more an' more, you to have no dread of me. That sound up there by the wood ; it might be Sally Catmer's laugh. She'll be out with her new sweetheart, I daresay. . . . Joan, you havin' no fear of me ! You that good, to stop by me after what I've done. But you're like somebody else now, never to be again so as I planned it out."

"I could not be afraid of you, Zeekel. I can never be anything to you—as you had wished it. But if I could go with you through the valley of the shadow, still I should have no fear."

"Then all that's left of your feelin's for me, is your pity."

"Yes," she murmured, "that is all."

Her back was still to him. She did not see his chest heave, his eyes flash in a supreme remembrance. Yet she knew that for the moment he had cast remorse to the winds.

"Whether or no I've to sit in Jim's prison cell, there's one thing they can't do to me. They'll never take back that kiss in my room at the almshouse ! Always on this earth, and in eternity if there's such a

place, I'll have it with me there. And if I was mean to do it when you and me was alone that night—I can't confess I feel in this minute I'm sorry for doin' it, Joan."

"Oh, forget me, forget me," she said; "forget all that is past—all but one thing!"

"I couldn't, my dear. It clings to me the closer because your pitifulness is all I've to hope for. I don't like being pitied, and I'll have none of it when my time comes, but yours is sweet and precious to me, like a soft lull when I was troubled in childhood. But nothin' can ever rub off that taste of your lips, Joan. It seems, when my mouth was on yours, I drew you in on my breath, in through my heart, for ever." He touched her shoulder with a great tenderness. "I've dreamed, in spite of all reason and justice to the contrary, as you might let me do it the same again, Joan——"

"No, no, never again in this world!"

He moved to her side, farther from her. "It was only my badness come back. Mebbe—if others could see me as I was that night—they'd say I was beyond my senses—from my love of you, my hunger-cravin' to have you for myself. And then, when I was out in the storm, I knew you'd be thinkin' of me, to be prevented from evil, though you never guessed what was in my heart. Nor Roger Coo neither; he don't suspect to this day, nor nobody. But it don't matter now, them not to guess it of me, with you like this because of it. Roger thought I was by him all the while, at Farmer Windeat's hayrick, the hanged rook swingin' up there on his pole—poor Roger, he was

that sleepy, with drink in his head, and I made a nest for him in the hay, where he sank in, with his concertina like a baby in his arms." . . . Draicot drew close to Joan. "I don't recollect doin' it for the purpose to keep suspicion off me. It had to be done, from the burnin' fire and misery in me, whatever the consequences. At first when Jim came back I thought it would be him I'd do it to; that's why now it's such a hardness to me to rescue him. You rose up after he trampled you down, and then they wanted to crush you again."

"They could not have done it," said Joan. "No one could have done it. I deserved to suffer."

"But that, my dear, was how I couldn't understand it. No, nor yet, Joan. When a woman rises like you did, and is persecuted and ill-treated again, a man can't stand to the sight, and keep on bein' a man if he does nothin'. I can't explain, but the Horsted preacher's words in our church seemed to uphold me in my secret thought, how only it could be ended——"

"No, no, no, Zeekel; all he said was opposed to violence."

"But he said her unrepentant betrayers were worse than the devils in hell."

"Unrepentant!" said Joan. "Zeekel, Zeekel—have *you* repented?"

His gaze had the stillness of self-communion. "So I'm doubled back on myself by your goodness!"

"By God's commandment," said Joan.

He walked away some steps. The nightingale had

ceased ; the silence was so deep that a door being shut far down in the village could be heard. Draicot returned to the motionless figure by the wall.

"It was because Martin couldn't see the angel in you. . . . I saw it faint-like, but the grossness in me made me take the wrong path. I turned a dark corner, and you stopped in the light. You're there still, beckonin' to me—Ah, I do know your silence is because you want me to see it as you do, and atone of my own accord. And I'm anxious for you to believe, Joan, it's never entered my mind to go away and leave you to it. I might live to be an old man, and Jim Anscomb be in a hangman's grave, but for you. It's when I think where you're leadin' me to, you sufferin' bitter every inch of the way—then somethin' calls me out of the dark corner I've got round. Joan, I've never confessed even to you. . . . 'Twas when Roger fell asleep in the hayrick, not doubtin' I'd keep by him. . . . Joan, your eyes are like as if you saw it all without me tellin' you——"

"It is not to me that it should be told, Zeekel. I am where I am—I can do nothing for pity of you, but O I have such terrors by night and day, wondering how long it can endure!"

"It might be easier," said Draicot, "if I began by confessin' to you. The sun was comin' up when I left Roger. The house looked that quiet and strange, like a house I'd dreamed of, but never seen before. Often when I'm in bed, I go through it all again, if I shouldn't say it's done in my brain, clearer than when it happened. The white-handled knife was on the table, and I heard him breathin' there on the hearth,

such a long length he looked. I never thought to do it to him in his sleep, yet it was best so, I do believe. I had no weapon on me, no, not a pocket-knife, and it was my intention to fight him till one of us should see no other sunrise. . . . Joan, Joan!——"

Her face was on the open Bible. He held forth his hands, but dared not touch her.

"I'm that afraid of you, Joan, to be near you, for all my love!"

She slowly raised her head. "Don't fear me. I am waiting—I can do no more."

"Waitin'," he said, "for me to go to Horsted?——"

"Yes. Oh, don't go yet! Not for my sake! . . . Did you say—you will be in your room—to-morrow night?"

"I'll be there," Draicot replied. "And when I hear the three taps on the window pane, that'll be Jim's sign for freedom."

"Oh, Zeekel, I am weaker than you know. I don't think I could ever plainly ask you to give yourself up!"

"Well, then, we'll not speak of it again. So now, my dear, if you feel equal to it, 'twould be very pleasin' to me to hear you read out some more from this big print where you left off."

She began again. "*—when—when it was yet dark—and seeth the stone rolled away.*" She paused. "Would you not rather read it yourself, Zeekel?"

He was looking over her shoulder. "Effie'll not need her specs for that print."

"This is the place," Joan said, her finger on the page.

Draicot read. "*Then she runneth, and cometh to Simeon Peter——*"

"It is Simon, Zeekel."

"So 'tis," he said. "There's Sally Catmer again, with her laugh; I wish you'd keep an eye on the lass, motherless and silly both, if you should think of it in the future. This was the place." He read a few words, and stopped. "Suppose you take a turn at it now."

She continued: "*Then the disciples went away again unto their own home. But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping. . . .* You read now, Zeekel."

"I donno if I can see. The moon don't seem as bright's she was a bit since. I'd take it for a favour if you could finish the passage."

She went on, and came to: "*She turned herself and saith unto Him, Rabboni!——*" She lifted her face to the sky. "Rabboni!" she cried in a marvellous accent: "Master!——" She was silent a moment. "For such as you and I, Zeekel, there is no other refuge." She shut the book, and gave it to him. "You must take it to your sister."

"So you're tellin' me, Joan?"

"Take it to your sister!" she said. She came from her shelter by the wall, and glided past him. She stopped, and he saw her pallid profile. "You say — to-morrow night — you will be in your room?"

"I'll be there," he replied.

"I may come to your window," she whispered.

"Then I'll lissen for the sign," said Draicot, "if so 'tis to be."

She went from him, under the trees. He took the book to Effie's house. She was in bed, but the door was unlocked (Nicholas not having come home yet), and he left it on the kitchen table.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALL the next day he was a very quiet man. He did the work the head gardener set him, did it well, and helped Roger Coo to get through his. When fellow-workmen spoke to him he answered them civilly, quite rationally, but with no superfluity of words. The Squire came into the gardens, strolled gradually nearer and nearer, watched him in the spirit of a doctor puzzled by an exceptional and apparently incurable case, and went away without speaking. "The woman," Mr Burward said to himself, "is bringing Draicot to his knees. She'll not end till his face is in the dust." And there (being a pessimist of insight) he was content, or rather willing, to leave the problem.

In the evening Draicot walked back to the village alone; and all the things by the way strangely interested him. He saw them in a new light, and it gave him a sense of homely reverence for these familiar objects among which he had moved almost every day since childhood. He was with them now in the intimacy of a vague secret farewell. He did not say to this or to that, to a path he had trodden a thousand times, to a plantation through which he had passed in all seasons from year to year, to a gate he had opened in many a twilight weariness—"Never again; other hands, other eyes to see, but never mine again." He did not say it; scarcely thought it. He lived it.

He stopped on the grassy road that led round by Parum wood to the almshouse. He stood facing the wood, but saw nothing of it. He turned slowly round and looked down at the sheepfold by the Shaws Barn in the park. In his mind's eye he saw a black female figure there, and again he heard the bleating of the lambs. He stood a long while, and he was glad of the dusk, and glad when he went on of the turf that gave no sound to his step. It seemed to him the earth was growing very small, as though he could stretch forth his arms and gather up all that was left to him in it. And that brought a deeper stillness upon him, the vision of final defeat. It did seem a little bit of a place, all that big world, when a man kept his gaze calm upon it in the twilight.

After supper he sat before the log fire the old pensioners had lighted in his room, not because it was cold, but because he had told them in the morning before going to work that he would be wanting a rest when he came home. He called the almshouse his home to please the old folk. They looked in to bid him good-night, and he answered cheerfully enough. And after that the almshouse was very still until Nicholas came in by the back way.

"Dozin', Zeekel, all by yourself," said the boy.

"No, I was wide awake, and heard you at the door. What for did you come in that creepy and mysterious?"

"I thought somebody," Nicholas replied, "might be with you."

"No, lad, I've not had company yet. And now

why do you stop there on the threshold, as if I was a stranger to you ? ”

The boy advanced softly into the room : it was in darkness ; a faint fire-glow was on his brother's face. “ It's late,” he said. “ If you like I'll come and sit with you an hour to-morrow night.”

“ No, no ; bide now you're here. I never expected you, but to-morrow night might be unsuitable to welcome you in my lodgin's.”

“ Have you been seein' things in the fire, Zeekel ? ”

“ Ay, a lot of them, Nicholas. I saw you there among the rest, and Effie, and mother.”

“ You do look that queer, Zeekel.”

“ It's the dark,” said Draicot, “ makes you have notions. Take that stool by the chimly jamb, and mind not to misfigure the Squire's costly fender with your feet. It'll be needed for them that come after me.”

“ Are you leavin' your lodgin's, Zeekel ? Oh, if the Squire's turned you out after Effie done it as well ! An' what makes you sit in the dark ? ”

Draicot leaned forward in his chair. “ I've had a tirin' day. Yet not much work done neither. I'd give you my easy-chair, only I'm lazy for it myself. What was the night like when you came in ? ”

“ Pitch,” said Nicholas ; “ air dead an' smelly, like autumn more'n summer. I could hardly find the door, with no light to guide me to your window.”

Draicot got up, and began to light his lamp. “ I'm not sure but what somebody else might want to find their way to my window.”

“ Who, Zeekel ? ”

"I donno whether it might be a ghost," said the elder brother.

Now Nicholas believed in ghosts. "I've never seen one for certain, Zeekel. I'd be in a sweat all over sometimes if I was to sleep up here close to the wood where they can hide. You're only laughin' at me, I do believe. My—what would it do to us if it was to come?"

"Mebbe we'd not see it. They don't always show their face, I'm told. It might only give a sign, or a tap on the window pane, and then go away, not wishin' to be visible."

Nicholas drew the breath of awe. "What would it be like, its sign? I've never heard a ghost's tap on a window. What do it sound like, Zeekel?"

"Oh, similar to the usual tap, I daresay. Only a tap . . . tap . . . tap." Draicot held up his hand and seemed to be listening. "Thrice. There might be some meanin' in it, to them that can read it."

"Three taps," said the boy.

"Well, well, no cause to tremble, lad; I do think it would be a peaceable ghost."

"Three taps," Nicholas repeated.

"It might be three; but I've not had much experience of them myself yet. Don't you be scared. If it comes, you just be still's a mouse, and I'll protect you. I'll not be positive but the taps would be meant for me, them not knowin' you'd dropped in."

"I wish I'd some salt to burn up the chimly, Zeekel. It frights them away when they see the blue flame, like fire from the bad place."

"We'll wait and see before wastin' honest salt," said Draicot. He came to the hearth, and looked at the clock on the mantel-shelf. He stood looking, until Nicholas asked him what was the time. "Twenty to ten." He put his elbows on the mantel-shelf, and Nicholas asked him if he was tired. "Not tired, in one way, yet in another I feel as if the clock had a lot of wearyin' news to give me."

"You've never pulled down the blind, Zeekel."

Draicot turned sharply to the window. "Ay, it's down; the colour deceives your sight; I drew it down soon's I came in."

Then said the boy: "Zeekel, your voice has grown awful like Effie's all at once. She says I want a new shave, to keep tidy after I've begun, and my beard sticks out thick now, don't it?"

Draicot smiled as he looked at him. "It don't blind the naked eye, Nick."

"But you can feel it comin' out." He stood up and Zeekel rubbed his hand on his cheek. "Isn't it rough an' brisly?"

"Oh, tolerable fierce for a month's growth."

"Only three weeks, Zeekel."

"It's not left no scratches on my hand," said Draicot; "but it don't need a beard like a hedgehog for pride at your age. So if you want another shave I'll give it you now, and that'll be better occupation than woolgatherin' about ghosts. Sit in my easy-chair, and I'll get the instruments ready."

Nicholas seated himself with rather a sacrificial air. "If we can get a afternoon off, Dave Lade and me are goin' to Horsted assizes for Jim Anscomb's trial.

Dave says you can be in the gallery for nothin'. I've never seen a man sentenced."

Draicot did not at once speak.

"So you're eager for a special clean shave to stare at Jim with, eh? I doubt if 'twould cheer him up much. But when a man's come to that pass he don't heed small trifles. And Jim might have one of his funny sorts of a laugh before it's over."

Nicholas gazed on the ceiling. "He'll not laugh when he hears the verdict."

"That's a serious kind of minute," said Draicot, "so I gather. And how's Effie in her temper then, after my slip in and out of her house last night with the family keepsake she's been hankerin' for?"

"I think she's more cheerfuller now she's got it back. My, what a splendid magnificent razor. Effie says you could come and see her at tea-time on Sunday, but not dinner, because she wants the roast beef to last cold Monday and Tuesday. Will you come on Sunday, Zeekel?"

"I'll not make no promise; but you might tell Effie it was agreeable, me to get her invitation. If you think of it tell her the first thing in the morning, before she's time to change her mind and regret her reconciliation. Now take off that grand fluffy muffler lest it should get soapy. You are a man for mufflers, Nicholas. No, no, let me cram the towel thick in to keep the wet from your shirt. And if you'll watch me when I'm shavin' you, how 'tis done, then you'll soon learn, and I might present you with my razor for a gift some day."

"Are you goin' to let your beard grow, Zeekel?"

"It might have to grow for a while."

"Zeekel," said the boy, "you do look queer."

"Sit still, sit still, lad. If the lather's hot don't make a shout—you might wake the old folk. See how I screw the brush round on top of the soap, not dabbin' it down like you unskilful shavers. So ; simple enough, eh? Now keep back your head, and your mouth shut tight."

Draicot shaved the boy with a perfectly steady hand.

"Effie says you left it on the kitchen table after she was in bed because your conscience made you."

"Then she's mistook. My conscience is clear on Effie, how I've behaved in her house, and so you could tell her if it comes to farther explanation."

"The soap's bubblin' in my ear. Will you go to Jim's trial, Zeekel?"

"There, now, more questions! Well, it's not decided yet. This whisker of yours don't break my wrist, though I daresay you'll feel froze with cold afterwards." Draicot stopped, and glanced back at the clock. "Ten to ten——" And then at the same moment the brothers sighed.

"Mr Tankervil," said Nicholas, "is going to Horsted assizes in his trap."

"He's a witness," said Zeekel.

"They say he's to give Mrs Potten a lift."

"She's a witness too."

"My, Zeekel, she's that broke down she could never walk."

After a pause: "She'll mebbe," said Draicot, "not need to go to Horsted." Again, this time sur-

reptitiously, he glanced at the clock. "I'm just at the finish of it—Stop your chatter, Nicholas. This is heavy work I've on hand, and I can't bear talk in it. Mrs Potten's partial to you, I think. Have you seen her lately?"

"I called as I came up to the almshouse——"

"Don't speak loud," said Draicot. "Was she in?"

"No. Her door locked. She might be out for one of those lonely walks she's fond of since Martin was killed."

Draicot wiped his brother's face with the towel, and told him to put on his muffler. As Nicholas got out of the chair he said he thought he heard a sound outside the window. Draicot motioned to him to be silent, and he sat on the stool by the fireplace.

Draicot again stood in a reclining posture with his elbows on the mantel-shelf, his eyes fixed on the glowing log. The stillness in the room was absolute. It was as though the brothers had been magnetised. And then there was a soft tap on the window pane.

"Zeekel," Nicholas whispered in dread, "the ghost is at the window. . . ."

But the murderer, called so gently to his account, stood motionless. All his energies of body and mind seemed to be concentrated in his gaze—and it was his gaze that filled Nicholas with a greater fear even than the ghostly tapping on the window. Then the second tap was plainly heard.

"Zeekel—I'm frightened to be here. . . ."

But Draicot did not stir; he appeared to be unconscious of his brother's presence. Still his eyes had the same intense, rigid expression, as though he

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were listening to a supernatural voice. And then, for the third time, the poor little tap was given upon the pane. And none on earth saw the woman kneeling on the ground without the window, the harlot calling the assassin to atonement. . . .

But Draicot stood up, after that, like a man. It was only Nicholas who trembled in the room.

"Don't you be troubled, lad—there'll be no more tappin' now."

"I thought you never heard, Zeekel."

"Ay—I heard plain enough. But no harm will come to you, Nicholas. For you it might have been no more than a willow blown on the pane."

"But there's no wind—not a breath—the night dead calm. Oh, Zeekel, get the salt and burn it up the chimly!"

"No need for that; they've gone away. You'll not hear it again. Here's your cap; you've been with me long enough for company."

"I'm all of a shake, Zeekel. I've never been where they made a sign before. Would it be all in white?"

"Or in black, mebbe," said Draicot. "Yet white in a way as well. A wonderful whiteness of courage would be in a visitor that could go through it—and not much braveness, I'm thinkin', in them it was meant for."

"I never could go home alone, Zeekel."

"Then I'll go with you to Effie's door. I'd like to see that old house again, even on a dark night, with you dreamin' of ghosts. Wait a minute; I want to peep in my box in the bedroom."

CHAPTER XXIX

NICHOLAS heard his brother pull the box from under the bed, and the rope being untied.

"You've no light in there, Zeekel."

"Oh, I can see, I can see. You bide where you are."

He was carrying two books when he returned to the sitting-room ; and in his pocket was the small leather bag containing all his savings. He gave the books to Nicholas, resting them first on his shoulder, and then curiously pressing them on the boy's breast as he spoke ; it was as though he wished to caress his brother but could not bring himself to it with sufficient excuse for the weakness.

"You'll make a fair gard'ner, Nicholas, if you're industrious to learn. It's a toilsome trade except for them that's instructed in the high branches of it. My books might give you a help, and so you're welcome to them, and I hope you'll study closer than I've done, because of my wanderin' thoughts on other subjects."

He suddenly stepped past Nicholas, and stood with his hand on the back of the easy-chair.

"You'll find hard names in them books. But the book of your own heart is harder to master. I'm beginnin' to think there's a lot I've not had time to learn yet——" He turned to the boy. "You begin young, and keep open your ears for Effie's wisdom."

"But she don't know nothin' about gard'nin'," Nicholas said.

"No, but she can lay down a sort of solid law that helps a man on to sleep with his fathers in due season. And mind you never loiter unnecessary in the hot-houses; that sickly heat is bad for the chest; I've often warned Martin Potten how it would end with him . . . when I've heard him coughin', coughin'. . . . So you learn to be a head-gard'ner, and have a house of your own, like Effie."

"I never could remember the Lattin names, Zeekel."

"No, nor me, how the scholars give them pronunciation; but if you write them down on slips of paper, with the everyday names underneath, and read them whenever you've a spare minute, they'll stick on your tongue. And now I promised to make you a gift of my shavin' razor, so you might as well have it while I'm in this fine generous state." He wrapped the shaving things in a handkerchief, and put the parcel in Nicholas's pocket. "See how you're loaded with my possessions; and not much left to covet."

"What are you givin' them to me for, Zeekel?"

"Oh, well—for that—I've had them a long while, and you get tired of things sometimes."

He went down on his knees, and began to tidy up the fireplace. Nicholas asked him why he did that.

"Oh, I always make it neat over night, to save the old ladies from bendin' their backs in the mornin'. I might take a long walk, after I've seen you home past the ghosts, not feelin' sure I could sleep comfortable in the almshouse to-night."

"But," said Nicholas, "it's a real feather bed you've got."

"Ay, but I've never settled down on it like I did on Effie's straw."

"Are you goin' back to her, then?" Nicholas asked intently.

"I can't say I am; but feather beds don't agree with me, and I might decide on a change to a different sort." Draicot stood up. "Now you find your way out cautious, and I'll be after you in a jiffy. Go along the passage to the door, and don't thump yourself against the wall, to wake anybody."

He waited till his brother was out of sight, and then turned the lamp low down. As he was about to blow it out his name came timorously from the passage.

"H'sh—I'm comin'," he answered.

He went to the window, drew the blind aside, and pushed up the lower sash. Again, in more apprehensive accent, his name came from the passage, and he wheeled round and again said: "H'sh—I'm comin', Nicholas——"

He looked out on the place where Joan had stood—to-night and once before. And both visits were as one in his impression of them. His chest sank on the sill. His face was pressed to the stone on which Joan had leaned as she tapped on the pane, when Nicholas again entered the room.

"What for have you opened the window, Zeekel?"

The younger brother never forgot the sound that broke from the elder as his great shoulders rose from the window-sill.

"I'm comin', lad."

"Zeekel—have you seen it?"

"I'm comin', lad, I'm comin'." He pulled down the window, and set straight the blind. "Nobody's there, but it was like as if somebody—and I'm that fond of fresh air. Now you go, before I put out the lamp. I do believe you want another sit in the Squire's lazy chair; but it's gettin' late."

So they went outside, and were going through the garden, when Nicholas asked Zeekel why he hadn't locked the door.

"Well, there—Oh, I think I'll leave it as 'tis. The old folks gener'ly come out early, and they might fumble for the key, and wonder not to find it on the inside."

"But you'll be back, won't you, before they're awake?"

"They don't sleep much," said Draicot. "My name's writ in them books," he added, "but I'll not be offended if some day you want to blot it out."

"I'll write mine next to yours, Zeekel."

"That's as may be; also accordin' to your affection of me."

"It's that dark, Zeekel, for a long walk."

"Ay—dark—yet a kind of growin' clearness somewheres."

"I can't see not one solitary star," said the boy.

"Nor me neither. Yet they'll be there, I doubt not, bidin' their time to shine. Let me carry the books."

"They're not heavy."

"Then take my arm for guidance. No; I'll take yours."

"What for do you laugh that strange, Zeekel?"

"Me laugh! I thought I only smiled low down to myself. You do watch me like a constable with his prisoner."

They stopped on the road, and Draicot looked back at the almshouse.

"I'm sorry for what them two kind old women will be troubled with in their minds. But they've been that charitable to me they might have a good word to say. One of them was at school with our mother, and she's told me what a sweet peace-lovin' girl she was—you takin' after her more than me. Can you see the church tower, Nicholas?"

"Yes; and that's Dave Lade's house down there."

"Ay; but if I was you," said Draicot, "I'd not go with Dave to the assizes. Them in the dock mightn't like to see you there."

He spoke unemotionally. He was fallen on the automatic quietude of the last resignation. All the rest, all that remained to be done, seemed very simple to him now; and he had only to move on to it unflinchingly.

"We'll go round by the pond, and across the glebe. Looks as if everybody was in bed. The Coach and Horses closed this half hour."

As they descended into the village Nicholas pointed to a light in Joan's window.

"Effie don't speak bitter of Mrs Potten now. My, nobody could, with her white face an' widow clo'se for Martin, like a holy nun. She do have a queer feelin' over me, the same as if I was drawed to her; and yet

when she speaks to me I can't find my voice. Can you, Zeekel?"

"You've no cause to be in dread of her," said Draicot. "It's only that big solitude on her, and she's been drove to it, so don't you suppose it's meant for an air of keep-your-distance. It seems as if some was born to it, and others make it for themselves through mistakes they never dreamt of till they'd been done. And only here and there a-one understands or cares. I've thought of it often lately, but thinkin' don't bring you much nearer to the mystery. It needs Mrs Potten's eyes."

"What mystery, Zeekel?"

"If I knew I'd tell you; but I've only a notion of it myself. Yet somehow it's there—above—all round—and always having its own way in the end." Again Draicot stood still. "That light in her window! Mebbe she's prayin' for somebody." He gazed upward. And as they went on: "Nicholas, dear lad, I do hope, whatever should come in your path—or in mine—you'll be good and clean in your life and thought, and patient before provocation, like Joan—Mrs Potten, I should say—her that's all by her own self over there in her desolate and broken up home, with hardly a friend in the world, and her such a burden to tell." They were passing the wall by the church; once more Draicot stopped. "Mother's over there," he said in a low voice, "beside father. I can make out the place."

"So can I," said Nicholas, leaning on the wall and looking over. "That's father, and there's mother."

"Ay—there they are. Father bought ground enough for me, and you, and Effie, when our turn should come. I've said to myself when I've been plantin' their favourite flowers, mignonette and sweet-briar for mother, and father's big carnations, here's where I'll rest likewise some day. . . . Don't say nothin', Nicholas, nor ask no questions! But I'm that thankful my conscience don't accuse me of wrong-doin' toward you in word or deed. 'Tis such a gladness to remember, after you've been by me all your days, and yet you don't think no ill of me."

"Zeekel, what's befell you? I do believe you're almost cryin', if I could see your face."

Draicot went on. They came to Effie's house. Draicot stopped at the garden gate.

"She might hear me if I was to go up to the door and suppose I was givin' a hint to be took back. You'll tell her, first thing in the mornin', it was consolin' to me the invitation for Sunday tea, but don't say as I promised to be there. And be sure you never speak to her, nor to nobody, not a whisper, about the ghost at the window to-night."

"Can't I tell Mrs Potten?" Nicholas asked.

"Well, for her, mebbe you might."

"Zeekel, you're hurtin' my hand."

"I forgot, laddie, from lookin' at the old home there. Only like a shed in the dark, but what a livin' thing in my heart! That south chimly's been squint ever since my memory begins. And now them roses over the door'll soon be out in their thick clusters. Well, well, I daresay I'll catch a glimpse of it in my dreams. And mind you stick to your work,

Nicholas, and be good, and don't ever try to set right things that's over high for you."

"Zeekel, where are you goin'?"

"Oh, only for a long walk; and if there's delay at the end of my journey——" He took his brother in his arms. "I donno but what I might get as far as Horsted before I've done. We've never been parted before. Good-night, Nicholas."

"Good-night, Zeekel; and I'll give your love to Effie as soon's I wake."

"Ay, the first thing in the mornin'. Good-night, dear lad, good-night."

Mr Tankervil, it so chanced, was late in retiring to rest that night; and "I'll not keep you a minute, sir," Draicot said to the old gentleman at the door, "you with your nightcap on ready for bed." He took the little leather bag from his pocket. "I've made bold to call, sir, to ask you to do me a kind obligation, if you would, knowin' it's not the first, and you and your wife been so considerate of her."

"What has happened, Draicot? Come into the passage."

"Thank you, but I'll not enter, if it's the same to you for a few words here. It came to me sudden to-night that I might be leavin' Harpsfield——"

"But you have a comfortable place at the park?"

"Ay, I've no complaint. But that subscription you've arranged for Mrs Potten, not in charity, but to show your regard and sympathy for her, I'd like to join in with my mite, in the same spirit among the others." He held out the bag; Mr Tankervil did not

at once take it. "'Tis not from the wish to offer a separate special gift, sir—no, but only how you did it, her not to know."

"But the list is closed, Draicot, and I have given Mrs Potten the money."

"But you could open it again, so to stop me from bein' disgraced for not havin' my name down among the others. I wish you would, sir, to please me, and you'll remember you've said, when I've helped you in your garden, as you'd do me a favour if you could. It's a honourable subscription, Mr Tankervil."

The old gentleman took the bag. "There seems to be a good deal of money here, Draicot."

"I've been a savin' man, sir, and always put by a little every week, though nobody could call me mean and speak the truth; and I've no debts, nor ever had none. I thought to fall back on the money for my wedded life; but I'll not be wantin' it for that now——" He moved away from the door.

"Stop a minute, Draicot. Do you know how much there is here?"

"Not to a pound or two, sir, but every penny is honest earned, and no shame to her to take it—yet mebbe you could give it to her so's she'd not know it was from me——"

"But is it all you possess?"

"She's poor, she's poor!" Draicot said, and walked rapidly down the garden and out on to the road.

CHAPTER XXX

IT was past one in the morning when he entered the Horsted police station. He was feeling very tired ; this had been a long day. I'll be that glad, he thought, to get in the cell for a lay down. An officer, writing on sheets of blue paper at a desk, looked up at the stranger.

"I'm the man that killed Martin Potten at Harpsfield, and I've come to give myself up for it." This Draicot said in a steady voice. He gazed at a row of handcuffs on the wall. "I'm sorry," he added, "for the police havin' extra trouble through me keepin' silence such a long while."

He paused again. That young constable over there, lyin' on his back on a form sleepin' sound, was wonderful like how Martin looked that sunrise on the hearth.

"Jim'll feel easier in his mind now. I donno but what hangin' would be more than fair justice, but he deserves the fright you've give him."

CHAPTER XXXI

It was the middle of September, and the first frosts were come, blackening the dahlias in Miss Treeves' garden, and making the robins familiar ; yet on this afternoon the summer seemed to be throwing back all its loveliness in softened tones. It was the day of Zeekel Draicot's trial at the Horsted assizes, and Miss Treeves was standing at her door.

"Why doesn't Mr Tankervil come!"

"Wouldn't it be better for you," Mrs Treeves suggested, "to take up Miss Windeat's gown?"

"I can't work, mother!"

Miss Treeves was a very sad and restless woman. She walked round the little garden, and appeared again at the door.

"I couldn't go to Horsted—not even to keep Joan company—and yet I can't reconcile myself to not having gone. Oh, what a long time Mr Tankervil is in coming!"

"And you won't want to see him, my dear, when he does come."

Miss Treeves went along the path ; and just then the Rector's wife came up the lane. They looked at each other, and Mrs Mewett saw that in the gaunt "striding woman's" face which moderated her condescension.

"The village seems deserted," she said, and paused .

for a reply, but Miss Treeves had none to give. "I've been wandering about—I couldn't sit still in the rectory, or anywhere else. It is too dreadful; and we have no society here. I must persuade Mr Mewett to exchange livings; the smallest benefice in a nice town would be preferable to a place where there is no telegraph office. It is really more than I can bear." Mrs Mewett moved on a few steps, and turned round, as though undecided which way to take. "The other man didn't seem to matter;" she was opposite Miss Treeves again. "I mean the creature with the horrid face. But to think that I shook hands with Draicot after he had——" Mrs Mewett shut her eyes a moment, and on opening them she looked away. "I must return to the Rector. He is deeply distressed; and the servants are reduced to imbecility—they can't work, and do nothing but sigh. It will be a relief when we hear the verdict. It is past four o'clock. You have not heard?"

"No."

"Mr Mewett thought the trial would be over in an hour. Have the villagers all gone to Horsted?"

"I don't know where the villagers are. It is to their credit that they preserve a decorous silence."

"Quite so. Nothing else can be done. No one can possibly pity him."

"I do," said Miss Treeves, and went indoors. She sat in utter dejection, and lamented once more that she had not gone with Joan. "Waiting for the verdict in court couldn't be so terrible as waiting for it here!" Miss Treeves' curls had no proud moments to-day: they hung limp on her shoulders, and were

tied with black ribbon. She paced the floor. "Oh—oh—if they should let him off?"

"You dream to say it, my dear. Gracious me, Janet, how could they? If he was my own son I durstn't hope for it. It's wrong you should speak so, and you wouldn't if you'd stop thinkin' of him as he was."

"But is all his life to go for nothing?"

"I don't say that, nor nobody can. But a wickedness like he's confessed to puts him apart from us for ever." Mrs Treeves kissed her daughter. "Now you calm yourself, dearie, and prepare for the worst. It would never do not to punish him."

"We don't know all, mother!"

"No, that's for Them above, but it's ordered Their verdict should come after the law."

Again Miss Treeves went to the door. She saw her father sitting by the pond, the solitary figure visible, and drew her mother's attention to him. "Poor father, he doesn't know what to do with himself to-day." She suddenly hurried down to the lane, and looked this way and that. She stood by the low rubble wall; the sun, a pale yellow splendour in a silver sky, seemed to mock her anguish. A golden butterfly danced over the blighted dahlias, and lighted on the wall; the starlings were vocal in the church tower; a blackbird sailed from the rectory copse down to the pond to drink. "Father, what are you doing there?——" It was scarcely more than a whisper; she was filled with a desire to help someone, to comfort someone more wretched than herself. She returned to the house, and took from the oven,

the dinner she had prepared for Nicholas Draicot. "It will keep warm enough on the rack. But it will be spoilt if he doesn't come soon."

"Poor lad," said Mrs Treeves, "he'll not be feeling the hunger-pinch much. You've not had a bite to eat yourself, Janet."

"I must take his dinner to the gardens," said Miss Treeves. "Mother," she asked, gazing at the picture over the mantel-shelf—"will you go to see him?"

"Nicholas?"

"No—Zeekel."

"Your father mightn't like it, Janet. And O I couldn't touch him, my dear."

"I shall visit him in prison," said Miss Treeves, "after—after he is sentenced. I shan't care what people say. If I had done it, and were under sentence of death, he would come to see me. Yes, he would! yes, he would!"

"Janet, Janet, control yourself."

I want to see him, mother! I have something to say to him. I may not say it, but I want to see him! And Joan will go too. Let them put us behind iron bars! O God, have mercy upon him, have mercy upon him! We'll go together, Joan and I. She *knows*—I couldn't keep it from her. Oh, how selfish I am when I think of all she has suffered! And Nicholas so hungry—hiding himself—afraid to come into the village." After a pause, wearily from the door: "This robin on the lilac tree is very tame, mother," said Miss Treeves. "We shall be having a hard winter."

"Yes, your father says he's never seen the haws thicker in the hedges."

"When the snow comes," said Miss Treeves, "it will be in time to match my hair."

"My goodness, Janet, there's not a grey thread in it yet."

"But I feel them coming. I'll never be young again, mother. Soon I shall be known as 'that old Miss Treeves.' Well, of course one can't help people being rude and ignorant." She held her mother's hand. "When I am 'old Miss Treeves,' with white hair and a dead heart, you will be younger than I am then, darling." She shook her curls in faint imitation of their haughty days. "But I mustn't break down: I must go on as though nothing had happened, for your dear sake, and father's. I shall finish Miss Windeat's dress to-morrow; we shall want the money for coal before the price goes up. Mother! listen!"

"Is it your father's step?"

"No—the sound of carriage wheels."

"Yes, I can hear them now."

"It must be Mr Tankervil!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE trap stopped at the entrance to the paved pathway ; Mr Tankervil was alone in it, and his customary aspect of geniality did not deceive Mrs Treeves, though it gave Miss Treeves a thrill of hope.

"You've brought good news, Mr Tankervil ?" she cried, grasping the splashboard and gazing eagerly up in his face.

"Truly I'm sorry it's bad," he said. "Draicot's been sentenced to death."

Mrs Treeves put her arm round her daughter's waist. But Miss Treeves did not need support ; her head remained erect under the blow, and Mr Tankervil saw no sign of trembling upon her.

"Where," she asked, "is Mrs Potten ?"

"I fetched them both home, but Miss Draicot made her go into her house. It's wonderful how they've taken to one another, especially Miss Draicot, so I left them there together."

"Won't you come indoors, Janet, my dear ?"

"In a minute or two, mother. What did he say, Mr Tankervil ?"

"Oh, he kept himself out of it, so to speak. Whoa, whoa, my gell. He left it for others to deal with, as you might gather from his manner in the dock. Only twice he opened his mouth ; once when he said, this at the very beginning, when the charge was read out,

'I am guilty,' speakin' the words with such a sober humbleness that drew the judge to put on his eye-glasses to look at him. The other time he spoke was when the Crown advocate in his address to the jury brought in Mrs Potten's name, and then all on a sudden Draicot cried out, 'She's a good woman!' You could hear the woodwork of the dock creak where he clutched it. Truly, ladies, 'twas a woful cry, yet no sound from him beyond the words, and you felt it cleared up her character like a flash of lightning as far as he was concerned in it. Not a woman there, I'm sure, but pitied him, for all his unpardonable crime."

"But the lawyers," said Mrs Treeves, "would never be so cruel to blacken Mrs Potten's name unnecessary."

"No, no; on the contrary, he was most delicate in his speech towards her. But Draicot must have been on the watch for him to do it, and so defended her before there was cause. When the judge passed sentence, Draicot stood looking him straight in the face, not boldly, yet like a man whose courage was not to be broke. And when the judge said, 'And may the Lord have mercy on your soul,' I couldn't help it—out I came with 'Amen,' and so too many another in court. The women-folk were weepin', and a big tear, the first I'd seen in her, trickled down Miss Draicot's nose."

"What," Mrs Treeves asked—"what did Mrs Potten say?"

"Not a whisper, that reached my ears, and I was seated all the while on one side of her, Miss Draicot on the other."

"But when sentence was given—did she not speak then?"

"No, not a mutter from her white lips, poor thing. Her eyes were set on the man in the dock. upright standin' he was like a soldier, no aspect of fear upon him, yet with an ashy paleness, and grown thin he is, his clothes lookin' as if they'd not been made for him. It was when I took the liberty of holding Mrs Potten's arm—just so's you, Mrs Treeves, might be your daughter's there—then her lips opened and shut, like a child's when it's asleep on a warm day, and 'twas as if a window had been opened to let the light in on her face, for I can't think she would smile at such a awful moment, remembering what's been disclosed about Draicot and her."

"She is noble and good," said Miss Treeves, and turned away.

"Well, I must be off," said Mr Tankervil, gathering up the reins; "I promised the wife to make haste back with the sad news."

Mrs Treeves and her daughter returned to the house. Miss Treeves took Nicholas's dinner from the rack and put it in a clean basin.

"It is time to be doing now, mother," she said bravely. "I shall soon make up my arrears of work."

She filled a bottle with tea, selected the most presentable knife and fork, and wrapped them in a towel. Then she put on her hat and mantle, and was kissing her mother, when she suddenly broke out in a tempest of grief. Mrs Treeves shut the door, lest anyone should hear. Never had she seen her girl in such a

state. It seemed to her that she had not known the depths of Janet's nature till now. This was something beyond filial love—something that had come late into Janet's life, and come only with despair. When she was quieted, she would not let her mother speak to her, but said, "Don't tell father!——" and set off for the Squire's gardens with Nicholas Draicot's dinner.

Some woodmen released themselves from labour to watch the tall woman going rapidly through the park. Miss Treeves had no doubt they were making impertinent remarks about her, but for once she was not angry at people's vulgarity. She found Nicholas and Roger Coo rooting up old strawberry plants in the kitchen garden, and her stoicism failed at the thought of telling the boy of his brother's condemnation. So she became perversely irritable, and noticing Roger's ragged jacket lying on the ground, she took it up, inspected it contemptuously, and abused Sally Catmer.

"Does she ever mend anything? What on earth does she do with her time, with only you and her father to attend to?"

"She says mendin' clo'se is extra," said Roger.

Nicholas went on with his work, saying nothing, nor looking at Miss Treeves. She longed to take the boy in her arms; but she merely said, "You promised to come and have dinner with us, Nicholas."

"I forgot, Miss Treeves," he answered, not lifting his head from his spade, over which it was bent so low that it seemed to Miss Treeves he would never be able to stand upright again; and she had to struggle

to keep back her tears. "Roger," he added, "fetched bread and cheese, and gave me a share."

"And is that all you have had?"

"Yes, Miss Treeves; I didn't want no more."

Did he know? Her knowledge of the poor told her that they could bear the most poignant suffering in a fatalistic silence, but never had the pathos of it been brought home to her so acutely as now. And her own sense of dignity was as dust in the balance. So she sat on the ground, close to the two young workers, still holding Roger's shabby jacket in her hand. The contemplation of Sally Catmer's laziness had a soothing effect upon her.

"How hot the sun is for September," she said, wiping her face with her handkerchief. "Why are you digging up the strawberries?"

"They're wore out," Roger replied.

The uprooted plants were lying all round Miss Treeves, and she liked the pungent, bitter smell of them. She lifted one or two. "Here is a ripe fruit," she said, toying miserably with her terror of revealing the truth, and constantly saying to herself: "Can he know? He can't know!" She picked off the berry, and pretended to be pleased, though it had been scorched to a dull russet in the furnace of the sun. "This must be the last. May I eat it?" There was no reply, but Roger said to himself: "She's that essentric." Miss Treeves put the fruit between her teeth. "Oh, how sour it is!" And then, as neither paid any heed to her: "What," she asked Roger, "is the matter with your nose?"

He rubbed it, and looked at his hand, apparently

expecting to find blood there. "Nothin' wrong with it," he said.

"Oh, but it is all covered with white fluff."

"Only the skin peelin' off from the sun," said Roger.

"It looks very peculiar. You ought to apply an emollient before going to bed. An emollient," Miss Treeves explained, "is a calming restorative to allay superficial irritation. Olive oil is a very good thing; I often rub it on my hands to soften them."

"It would soon get cured," said Roger, "if I could spit on it."

"Oh, but that is a most unbecoming thing to do." Miss Treeves appeared to be searching for another belated strawberry; but her eyes were never removed from Nicholas's stooping body. "Nicholas——" she said very gently.

"Yes, Miss Treeves."

"Have you—heard anything?"

"No, Miss Treeves," he answered, still not looking at her.

"He knows what it'll be," Roger said in colourless tones. "Zeekel's to be hanged. I can guess it from the sinkin' in my stomick." He rested one foot on his spade, and faced Miss Treeves. "You've got black tape tied in your curls."

"Oh, no; it is silk. And gentlemen shouldn't make comments on ladies' attire."

"I only said it," apologised Roger, "because I've never seen you except red before." He glanced at the bottle of tea. "My, I am thirsty."

"It is only cold tea," said Miss Treeves, "for Nicholas."

"Ale would be more cheerin' up," said Roger. "I'll get drunk to-night," he added lugubriously.

"Oh, no; you mustn't do that," said Miss Treeves. "But why to-night?"

"Because of Zeekel."

"This is your dinner, Nicholas. Won't you stop work for a few minutes, and eat it? You might sit down here beside me, and I could speak to you."

"I don't want no more dinner, Miss Treeves." He had always been polite to her, since Zeekel had told him not to call her the costumeer.

"He's the same sink-down in his inside like me," Roger explained. "A sup of ale would keep it up. Nick, I do believe you'll see the ghost to-night again."

"I cannot permit you to talk such nonsense, Roger," said Miss Treeves a little severely. "Nicholas, you really must—Oh, you should eat this nice dinner I've specially prepared for you."

"What's in it?" Roger asked.

"The leg of a fowl, a piece of boiled pork, potatoes, cabbage, and a sweet turnip—but it is not good manners for you to ask such a question."

"Fowl is my favourite flesh, when I get it," said Roger.

"Now, now," the dressmaker rebuked him, "don't you know it is very impolite to give insinuations?" She appealed again to Nicholas, but he shook his head: he was using his spade mechanically. "Do

take a little of it," she pleaded. "Now—just to oblige me."

"I don't want it, Miss Treeves."

"Oh——"

"I'm bound to get drunk to-night," said Roger with a melancholy air, "even if Sally makes me sleep out for it."

"You've never," Miss Treeves reminded him, "seen Nicholas's brother the worse for drink."

"He confessed," cried Nicholas, a sudden trembling upon him; "they'd never have known it was him done it if he'd not confessed." And then, as suddenly, he became listless again, and went on with his work.

Miss Treeves could find no words for a while.

"You are very foolish and wicked, Roger," she then said, "to think of getting intoxicated, and if I see you in that state I shall give you a serious scolding. Nicholas, I want you to come and have supper with my father and mother to-night. It will keep you out of people's way, and you mightn't like to be at home with your sister." She waited for a response, but the boy was silent. Then she said to Roger: "You might come too, and be company for him, and play draughts together on the new board I've bought, and that would save you from being in mischief at the Coach and Horses."

"I can't come," said Roger; "Dave Lade's been to Horsted assizes, and I want to ast him about Zeekel."

And now at last Nicholas stopped digging and turned to Miss Treeves. She nerved herself for his question, knowing that it would be so terribly simple as to leave her no chance for further pretence.

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"Has my brother been sentenced, Miss Treeves?"

Her hands were lifted pitifully, as though she would draw him to her.

"Yes, Nicholas"

The boy hung his head, but he did not speak. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and then he began again to dig up the old strawberry roots.

"Oh, Nicholas," said Miss Treeves, "you must be brave! He may be pardoned, you know."

"If it was me," said Roger, "I'd rather be hanged than in penal servitude for ever. Wouldn't you, Miss Treeves? O my, I'm worse sunk down, and I do want a taste of that tea."

"Well then—" Miss Treeves took out the cork—"I forgot to bring a cup; you must drink from the bottle." She handed it to Roger, and as he put it to his lips, "Mind," she cautioned him, "not to be selfish, and leave some for Nicholas."

"It's horrible sweet," said Roger.

"I thought boys liked it sweet," said Miss Treeves meekly.

"Effie'll be that disgraced," said Nicholas.

"I think she is bearing up wonderfully," Miss Treeves told him.

"She don't ever show it," said the boy, "whether she do or no. I want to go home," he added, his chest almost on the top of his spade.

"Then can't you come home with me?"

"It's not time to leave off," he replied. "I wish it was me, Miss Treeves, instead of Zeekel——"

She stood up. She wanted to get away into the woods to hide her grief.

"Do try to eat your dinner, Nicholas—I will leave it with you."

She strode off through the kitchen garden, and by a side gate entered the park. The boys went on with their work.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THEY worked, almost in silence, for half an hour after Miss Treeves was gone. Then said Roger, "That drink of tea has made me hungry, Nick. Let's see what she's fetched." So they sat on the ground and ate the dinner, both feeling vaguely grateful to Miss Treeves, yet neither making audible praise of her cooking, except when Roger said, "She's boiled it till it peels off the bone."

After this they had another spell of dull labour; and when the sun began to fall into Parum wood, Roger shouldered the spades to take them to the tool-house, while Nicholas tied up the dinner things in the towel.

"I wish you'd leave them at her house," he said to his companion; "I don't want to see her again."

"Only her mother or father might come to the door."

"But I don't want to see nobody," said Nicholas.

"Well, I'll take 'em. But you can't help it, Nick. So-long."

"So-long, Roger. Mebbe I'll run away."

"If I was you I'd go for a sodger," said Roger. "There's not enough space round my chest or I'd go with you and 'list in the same regiment. But don't you go on the tramp, Nick; Andrew Catmer says

they never stop it when they do, and die with cramp in a ditch."

Nicholas dragged himself across the park ; had he not been so tired he would have gone all round by the hills to get home without showing himself in the village. He would have liked to crawl into a coppice and pass the night there, but Effie would be expecting him, and if he were to stay out alone in the dark he might see the ghost again. About the strange tapping on the almshouse window, on Zeekel's last night in Harpsfield, Nicholas had forgotten his promise to his brother to keep silent ; but neither he nor anyone else seemed to guess that Joan had had anything to do with it. To this day the legend of the tapping is told in awed tones in the village, and it is always ascribed to a supernatural visitant. So are unseen terrors created from broken hearts.

On leaving the park by the north lodge gates, Nicholas looked up the high-road and saw people gathered outside the inn. They would be speaking about Zeekel. Jim Anscomb might be among them ; he would be sure to come back in a hurry to show off his ugly face. Well—let him brag ; if it hadn't been for Zeekel he'd have been hanged and buried in lime by now. Poor Nicholas, in the unreason of sorrow and shame, felt very bitter against Jim.

He crossed the road, and took the glebe path. When passing along by the rectory garden, his eyes on the ground, a voice of condescending kindness said, "How do you do, Nicholas ?" It was Mrs Mewett, looking at him over the hedge ; she had seen the boy advancing, and had come down to the end of the

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garden to say a word of sympathy to him. He gave her a clumsy, pathetic salute, answered shyly, "Thank you, m'm, the same to you," and went on. Mrs Mewett said to herself, "It is fortunate for him that his sister is so unemotional."

He was under the elms before the school when Sally Catmer ran after him, her hair dishevelled, her face very dirty, her eyes red with weeping.

"O Nicholas!——" That, for some moments, was all she could say, but she held on to the boy almost savagely when he tried to get away. "O my, 'zf I can believe it! I can't, I can't! And him the best man I've ever known! Father's come home," she panted, "and I've made a strong pot of tea, three heaped-up spoonfuls—O my, Nicholas, we'll be that pleased if you'll come in and have a cup."

"Effie'll be expectin' me," he replied.

"Seed cake," coaxed Sally hysterically, "and new bread and butter. Or I'll cut you a piece of cold ham."

"I must be home," said Nicholas.

"Will you come to-morrow, then?"

"I don't think I will, Sally."

"O what for not?"

But Nicholas walked on.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HE turned up by the church, and got home round by Mr Tankervil's garden. Joan was still there with Effie; the women were sitting in the kitchen in the twilight. And now there were three grey souls in the grey light.

"Good-evening, Nicholas," Joan said.

Her presence dried up the well of speech in him. He could look at Effie, but not at Mrs Potten. He did not in the least know why the sound of her voice seemed to carry him so close to his brother.

"You're late, Nicholas," said his sister. "You'll be wore out and hungered."

"I'm not so very hungry, Effie. Miss Treeves brought me a half-fowl almost and boiled pork to the gardens."

"You should have took the dinner I got ready for you," said Effie. "I'll never," she added in her old heavy manner, "have the heart to take my custom from Janet Treeves after this." She had a heap of white stuff on her lap, her big ungainly hands resting on it in a kind of benediction. "Fetch me that sheet of brown paper from the cupboard, Nicholas, and don't drop the tissue inside it." Her voice had its usual calm monotony. Nicholas did as he was bid, and then saw that Effie's lap was full of her white lace. She began to roll it up in the paper. "If I said I

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was partin' from it without a grudge it wouldn't be true, and us Draicots don't tell lies, no, not even when we've to suffer for speakin' the truth. But I'll never wear it again, so you may as well have it, my dear. Crape now for me to the end of the day ; but you're young, and he's not your kith or kin, and in time when the hankerin' for dress is on you again you'll find a use for it." Sister Effie sighed. "Go an' wash yourself at the pump, Nicholas, before it's dark." To Joan: "He always leaves candle-drip on the floor, and my knees'll not be fit for scourin' this week."

"I'll come and help you," Joan said.

"Ay, you would, I'm sure, but I've never had help in my housework yet, and it's not time to begin till I've took to my bed. An' I'm not goin' to, unless it's a hour stole from the afternoon to make up for a sleepless night. I donno," said Effie, "if he'll sleep sound where he is, but that officer that gave me his arm down those greasy steps told me they'll not ill-use him till the last mornin'."

"Don't speak of that to Nicholas," Joan whispered. "He couldn't bear it, Miss Draicot, as you do."

"He'll have to learn to," said Effie placidly. "Us Draicots have always been respectable till now, and it's our duty to submit to the change humbly, seein' it's come."

"Nicholas is so young, poor boy," said Joan.

"An' I'm that old grown all of a sudden," said Effie. "I've bore up till to-day, but when I saw that black cap on the judge's head, seemed as if somethin' broke in my breast, and I know it's not to be mended. But us Draicots have never lacked courage, and I'll

not pamper myself on grief, no, nor let Nicholas do it neither. Here's the lace, Mrs Potten; I've not thought to make you a gift of it, nor nothin', but you've drawed yourself to me this day, and I hope you'll forgive and forget my words about you in the past, which they've never been scandalous, yet I've done you harm when I could. But this day you've been cleared, and now I know it's been harder for you than I've give you credit for."

"But I can't take all your beautiful lace, Miss Draicot."

"Beautiful 'tis," said Effie, keeping the parcel fondly on her knees, "but my white lace days are over for this world."

"Part of it, then," said Joan; she was darning Nicholas's socks. Effie, as soon as they got back in Mr Tankervil's trap, had said it was safest to find some work to occupy their minds. "I shouldn't like to take it all. Just a little piece that I may keep in remembrance of you. Perhaps you'll let me select it."

"Pick out what you fancy then, and I'll give you some of our family stuff for killin' the moth, and if ever I want it back I'll ask. I've no relations to leave it to in my will, exceptin' my cousin Bertha, and she's been in Australia and not writ me a line these twenty years. She was no true Draicot, bein' a most shiftless woman, on mother's side."

"I will take great care of it," said Joan.

Effie sighed again as she put the parcel on the dresser. "Never in Harpsfield has there been such a lot of valuable white lace wore by one woman. It's only envy in them that's hinted it's fit for antimicassers.

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It suits black satin best, from the colour an' pattern, and the worst of black lace on black is nobody hardly sees it's there, an' you don't feel you get value for your money."

Nicholas returned to the kitchen and sat down at the table, where his tea was laid. Joan, afraid of the silence, asked him what work he had been doing in the garden, and he answered: "Rootin' up old strawberry plants, Mrs Potten." His face was close to the table, but he was not eating anything.

"Strawberries," said Effie, "is my favourite fruit, also jam, from there bein' no seeds to get in your teeth. Mother was the same, but father's preference was black currant made thick till you could cut it almost. It's always been the rule with us Draicots never to dip the top jam-paper in spirits. No need to if they're proper preserved."

The three sat for some minutes saying nothing. Sister Effie was motionless, her eyes very still, as though she were living again in a scene that must not be spoken of. Nicholas now glanced timidly at Joan, and said to himself, "She's thinkin' of Martin and Zeekel." His head sank lower on the table.

"I've forgot," said sister Effie, "if you said your grace, Nicholas."

"I don't want no tea, Effie."

"But you must, for your good. Of old 'twas said, the belly keeps up the back, and I'm not the one to harbour idleness in our disgrace. It's come on us, and if the mountains fall and the sun stands still, like it does in Joshua, there 'tis, an' fastin' only brings a sick mind. Now say your grace, and begin."

The boy clasped his hard brown hands on his brow. " 'Hallowed be Thy name' ; " the words came moaning out of the bursting young heart.

"Us Draicots," Effie explained to Joan, "always say the Lord's prayer for grace. It's been in the family before my time, and many's the word I've had with Zeekel because he stopped it. This day it mightn't be with him so as 'tis if he'd trod in his ancestors' footsteps. Now, Nicholas, offer it up complete."

" 'Thy kingdom come——' " He tried hard not to break down before Joan. " 'Thy will be done——' " And that was all anyone heard.

Joan rose, to go to him, her eyes full of tears, but Effie held up her hand.

"He's never been petted, and if you begin he'll weaken on it. You keep reg'ler at your work, Nicholas, with no converse with them that seek the bread of sloth, an' watch how Mrs Potten, with trouble in plenty, and more to follow very like, yet has the sense not to go an' meet it. Nor me neither."

Joan stood at the opposite side of the table. "I am mending your sock, Nicholas." She smiled in the hope that he would look up and be comforted. "Your sister is quite right, you know ; we all have our sorrows, but it is not well to grieve too much."

"It's never been the fashion for us Draicots to do it," said Effie. "We've our hearts and our feelin's, but we don't run 'em up on a mast in public. My respect for Mrs Potten, though I say it before her face, began when I found she was the same. Now stand up and let her measure the sock on your hand. The

Draicot foot," she informed Joan, "has always been the same length as the Draicot hand."

Joan went to Nicholas. He stood up, sheepishly extended his hand, and she stretched the sock from toe to heel upon it. "That will do nicely, I think," she said. He sat by the table again, and Joan took a chair close to him.

"I was frightened you might be gatherin' it in overmuch," said Effie. "I do wonder," she went on, "they don't give that assize court a clean up. Dust loaded everywheres you look; cobwebs thick in the corners, and walls and windows that grimy you could write your name on them. Zeekel's never seen my house in such a mucky state. So likewise the big sword like gold over the Royal coat-of-arms, dreadful rusty 'twas, and the floor cryin' out for soap and water."

Nicholas partly turned to his sister. "Is it a real gold sword, Effie?"

"For that I can't say, but a polish it do want badly."

"What," the boy presently asked—"what do they do with it?"

Effie did not flinch from the question. "It's only for what it signifies up there above the judge's head. The sword of justice. An' now—so you might say—it's fell on your brother."

"He confessed," said Nicholas, bowing his head again. "Of his own accord he gave his ownself up."

"However that may be," said Effie stoically, "I've not sought to fathom it, nor will."

"Yes, yes! He gave himself up to justice!" said Joan. "That was all he could do. And he made no defence. His crime was great—Oh, don't let us speak

of it, Miss Draicot!—he has done all that was possible to him to atone.”

“It’ll never be said of me,” Effie replied, “that I tried to paint even my own flesh and blood white when he’d painted himself black. His sister I am, but not his excuser—no, nor you neither, I’m sure, Mrs Potten.”

“Oh, I wish,” said Nicholas, “I wasn’t to be sleepin’ by myself to-night.”

“What for?” Effie asked.

“I do believe I’ll hear the ghost again—tappin’ thrice on the window-pane——”

Joan put her hand on his shoulder. “No, no, Nicholas, don’t be afraid; you’ll not hear it again! . . .”

CHAPTER XXXV

ZEEKEL'S days shortened, and nothing was done to save him from the hangman's hands. The great world not knowing the truth, and so not finding him an interesting criminal, was content to leave him to his fate: it heard that he was "callous," and there left him—and despair gripped the hearts of them that had cared for him. Some thought of him as one already dead: to others he seemed as one who had lived among them such a long while since that they doubted whether they would recognise him were they to see him now; and others again spoke of him only as they remembered him in boyhood. And then there fell a day in Harpsfield that was called "Zeekel's last Sunday"; and a fair and smiling day it was, like the day of his condemnation.

It was upon this Sunday, in the still time of the afternoon when the children were in the school, that Nicholas Draicot came upon Roger Coe wandering disconsolately on the Thakeam road. They joined company, and strolled back to the village.

"Where was you off to, Roger?"

"Nowheres. Only out."

"Same's me," said Nicholas. "I come through by the church, and saw fresh flowers on Martin's grave. Mrs Potten would put 'em there."

"No, I did," said Roger. "Oh, Nick, I wish he was alive."

The boys stood leaning on a gate, looking at Farmer Windeat's cows. Across the meadow the windows of the farmhouse glittered in the sun; and one of the Miss Windeats was sauntering in the garden with her lover. Nicholas took from his pocket a crumpled and not very clean sheet of paper. It was a page torn from a copy-book in which he had been writing botanical names, and at the top of it, in Nicholas's crude schoolboy hand, were the words: "Petishon to the King for pardin." Under this were ruled lines in pencil, but no signature.

"Is it a letter from Zeekel?" Roger asked.

"No—he's not writ yet, an' Effie says he never will, nor she to him. Roger—this is his last Sunday."

"I wonder what he's doin' with his waste time," said Roger. "Last night when I was playin' 'Home, sweet home' on my concertina it seemed as if him and Martin was lissenin'."

"Oh, I wish they was," said Nicholas, very depressed.

Roger took the paper. "Who put you up to it, Nick?"

"Nobody. Effie locked herself up in the bedroom with the book after dinner, and then it came in my head all of itself, I donno how. I smothered my hands on the paper not to let her hear I was tearin' it out. I'll not tell her unless she finds I've done it, because she says there's no use doin' nothin', and she's cross because Miss Treeves won't make her crape gown, so she's goin' to Thakeam for it in the mornin'."

"She's queer," said Roger, "your Effie." He returned the petition to Nicholas. "You've made plenty room for names."

"I'm on my way round with it," said Nicholas. "But I donno where the King lives, to send it to him. He has a lot of cassels, and I don't want to post it to the wrong one, for fear he only gets it too late."

Roger said Mr Tankervil, who had a fresh newspaper every day, might know where the King was, so they made for his house.

"You stop outside," said Nicholas; "Mrs Tankervil easy frets with dusty feet on her carpet."

But Mrs Tankervil was very motherly to-day to the motherless boy, and made him take a glass of her parsnip wine.

"It would be proper in the circumstance," said Mr Tankervil, "first to toast the King's health." He filled a glass for himself, and another for his wife. "Here's to him, then, and God bless him."

"And God bless you, Nicholas," said Mrs Tankervil.

"Zeekel too," said the boy.

"Well, well, there now," said Mr Tankervil, blowing his nose.

He signed the petition, and then Mrs Tankervil took the pen. "The spelling's wrong," she whispered to her husband; but he said: "Let it be. The scholarship of it won't matter one way or another. We've set our names to it, Nicholas, but you should have asked the Rector and his lady first, also the Squire, them being important, with signatures recognisable in high circles. We've left space for them in the place of honour at the top."

"Will the King pardon him, Mr Tankervil?"

"Ah, well, now, to be sure——"

"You must hope for the best, Nicholas," said Mrs Tankervil.

"Where do he live, Mr Tankervil?"

"At Windsor Castle, so the paper says. If you'll come to me again when you've got all the names you can I'll address it in a new envelope."

The document had to be unfolded for Roger to see, and then they went to Andrew Catmer's. He could only make his mark, Sally directing the pen. Then Sally licked the nib, dipped it deep in the ink, scraping it round and round in the grimy little bottle, and having made Roger stand away from the table, she signed her name laboriously. "I never knew," she said, "Mrs Tankervil was baptised Lucy. Now you, Roger." He signed. "Now your own name, Nicholas," said Sally.

But he shook his head. "The King might guess I'm related to him——"

"'Zf that's against it! Of course you must. Take my chair here; I'll tilt the inkpot up for you. You've scratched all the mud from the bottom, Roger! Write it plain, Nicholas, so's they can see and have pity because you're his only brother. I wonder," cried Sally, "how they'd like to see their own brothers hanged."

"But the King," Roger puzzled, "mayn't know he's his brother."

"We're the only Draicots in these parts," said Nicholas.

"Might as well be writ down," Andrew suggested, "to make sure the Crown's not mistook."

"Should I, Mr Catmer?"

"I would if I was you, Nicholas."

"Yes," said Sally. She put her finger on the paper. "Just under there—I'm *his only brother*. Don't you crush forward, Roger, and make him blot the place."

"I don't think much of I'm his only brother," said Andrew. "Sounds as if he was throwin' it at 'em. *From his only brother* would be more respectfuller."

And so Nicholas wrote it.

"If it was me," said Sally, "I'd say father and mother dead, and my sister never shed a tear."

"No, no, that'll not help," said Andrew, "him a man of full age and lawful responsibility."

"Well, let it be so," said Sally. She made Nicholas have a cup of tea and a piece of cake; Roger also had a cup, and a much smaller slice of cake.

"You're clever at cuttin' it wafer thin, Sally," he said with his feeble smile.

"I can't afford to fat *you* up with dainties," she replied. "O my gracious don't cram the petition in your pocket, Nicholas; you'll make it all towsly and smutty—and don't wipe your cakey fingers on it! The King'll be disgusted to handle it when he sees it in a mess. Here's a big envelope, come yesterday with threat of a summons for father—two shillin' extra to pay for nothin'k!—but it'll keep the petition clean and tidy. Let me shove it in neat." Sally folded the paper, and kissed it. "Good luck to you," she said, the ready tears coming. "O my stars, 'zf I couldn't kiss Zeekel as well!——"

"His last Sunday," muttered Andrew.

"Hold your tongue, father, do! Who knows it is?"

And Nicholas here!—Roger, don't stand gapin' there with your glary eyes!"

As the boys left the cottage: "She's a termigent," said Roger.

The rectory was next visited. Nicholas urged Roger to go in with him, but Roger said: "No, I durstn't, Nick; she'd rag at me worse than Sally."

So Nicholas went in alone.

The Rector and his wife looked at the paper, then at each other. They appeared to be genuinely distressed.

"Would you be that kind to sign it, sir?"

"My dear fellow," said Mr Mewett, "I cannot possibly do that."

"I thought you would, sir. It's only for pardon."

"Oh, but—it is impossible," said the Rector.

"I know," said Nicholas falteringly, "it was him that done it. But he confessed, and got Jim off."

"It is not that at all! I'm very sorry indeed to disappoint you, but if—well—if—if the petition were drawn up in legal form I don't think I could refuse to attach my signature to it. But this, my dear boy, is quite irregular."

"It would never reach his Majesty," Mrs Mewett said kindly.

"But Mr Tankervil says he's at Windsor Cassel. He saw it in the paper."

"Whose writing is this at the top?" Mrs Mewett inquired.

"Mine, m'm."

"We are deeply sorry for you, Nicholas," Mrs Mewett said; "but a matter of this sort, you know,

ought to have been drawn up by a lawyer. And I must tell you that there is no——"

"H'm; there are certain formalities which must be observed," put in the Rector.

"I saw your sister yesterday," continued Mrs Mewett. "I spoke to her at the request of Mr Burward, who has been in communication with the Home Office in reference to your brother, and I was regretfully compelled to make it quite clear to her that nothing can be done to——"

"H'm," broke in the Rector again, touching his wife's elbow. "Perhaps your sister has not acquainted you with the purport of Mrs Mewett's visit?"

"Effie says the King'll not forgive him. But I only want him to pardon Zeekel," pleaded the boy.

"You mean the commutation of the capital sentence?"

"O if he'd pardon him!" said Nicholas.

"That's what he means," Mrs Mewett whispered to her husband. "It would be a mistaken kindness, Nicholas, for us to encourage you in a groundless hope. I had expected that your sister would tell you. She has quite made up her own mind that nothing can be done; I found her entirely resigned."

"My dear fellow," the Rector said, "both Mrs Mewett and myself profoundly regret being obliged to refuse to sign your paper."

"It is not really a refusal," Mrs Mewett explained. "Don't go away with the idea, please, that we would not help you if we possibly could."

Nicholas put the petition in his pocket. They went with him into the hall, and both warmly shook

hands with him. "Don't think you are friendless," Mrs Mewett said to him. "If I can do anything for you, at any time, you must come and see me."

The petition was carried to every house in Harpsfield, and all the common people willingly set their names to it. Dave Lade noted a lack of fitness in the wording, and Nicholas, remembering Miss Treeves' repute for learning, mentioned this criticism to her.

"It might have a more stately commencement," she admitted. "Supposing it began, 'To his most gracious and beloved Majesty King Edward VII., by the grace of God our Sovereign Lord, Defender of the Faith, Fount of all Honour, and Emperor of India.'"

"It do sound polite and coaxyfied," said Peter Treeves. "You write it in, Janet."

"Shall I, Nicholas?"

"Please, Miss Treeves."

"She's got a rolling bold hand like a man," said Peter.

"I will inscribe it in violet ink; that will look more impressive," Miss Treeves said, "and attract immediate attention." She began, but stopped, and asked her mother to hand her the dictionary. "I forget if there are two fs in defender, and it would be shocking for the King to think we are ignorant." She tried to correct Nicholas's spelling, but blurred the words, and then erased the introductory line, rewriting it in fuller circumstance, but said nothing of this. Her parents also signed their names.

"The Lord's blessing on it," said Mrs Treeves.

"The same here," said Peter. "Amen, and His mercy also."

And then suddenly, as Nicholas was leaving the house, Miss Treeves went into her bedroom, and shut the door.

"I'll be that thankful when it's all over—that dreadful morning," said Mrs Treeves.

The last visit was to Joan. Roger would not go in. "I can't face her," he groaned; "I'm off to the gardens. I've got my concertina in the stoke-hole, and if you come down we'll have a tune, instead of goin' to church. I'll play you Martin's favourites. Nick—don't tell her Joe Eyles found the ferret in the hayrick and sold it for a shillin'." Roger crept on tiptoe down Dripping-pan lane.

Nicholas, having spread out the petition on the table, stood awkwardly watching Joan read it. "She do look a broke old woman," he thought.

"You wish me to sign it, Nicholas?" she said with great gentleness.

"I'm ashamed to ast you, Mrs Potten, but it's only for his pardon."

"There is no need for you to be ashamed of asking me, Nicholas." She turned away, and took a bottle of ink and a pen from the mantel-shelf. "May I put my name at the top," she said, "next to yours?"

The condemned man's brother could not speak. He hung his head in a great humiliation and wonderment of her forgiveness, rubbing the tips of his fingers on the edge of the table, as though that were an answer to her question. There was no chair at Joan's side of the room, so, after stooping awhile, she knelt on the floor to write.

And this is what she wrote: "*Joan Potten, widow*

of Martin Potten." And having written, she pressed her hands on her face, and remained silent—a long while silent, it seemed to Nicholas. Not liking to look at her so, his eyes wandered about the room, and as they lighted on things that had belonged to Martin, his mind wandered too; and then he thought the murdered man's widow was speaking to him, but only her lips moved, and Nicholas heard no syllable.

"Mrs Potten—I didn't ought to fetch it to you."

"I am glad you did, Nicholas." She stood up. "Yes, yes, you couldn't have passed me by. I would have signed it if only for your sake." And when she put her hand very tenderly in his, the lad trembled in a greater wonder of her. "I am so sorry not to know what to say to comfort you, Nicholas. I think, my dear, you will learn to grow calmer within yourself if you try to remember—what it means—your brother having given himself up. What he has done can't be undone. But he has done what he could to make atonement. I feel sure he would have taken the same course had James Anscomb not been in prison."

"Won't they pardon him, Mrs Potten?"

"He is beyond our help, Nicholas. But each of us can say, 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins.' He so—so terribly transgressed the eternal law, and for that he is accountable to the Searcher of all hearts."

"O Mrs Potten, will he be put in the bad place when he's dead?"

She drew her arm across the boy's shoulders. She repeated in louder tones: "'I believe in the forgiveness of sins.' He transgressed also, O so grievously,

the law of men, and set at naught the sanctity of human life. Nicholas, for such a crime as his there must be punishment, you know. But we may hope when a man repents and goes to meet it."

"If only they'd stop him from the gallows," said the boy. "Won't they, Mrs Potten?"

"I don't know, Nicholas. They are all so far away from us; we are here shut in by ourselves, and can do nothing. They can't understand; we can't expect them to know so much about his whole life as we do. It may be that the act of punishment is not so dreadful to your brother as it seems to us. Ah, my dear, you must try to see that he cannot be forgiven in this world!"

Tears were on the lad's sun-burnt cheeks. "O Mrs Potten, when I was out there in the fields, I thought if only the King knew Zeekel like I do—what he's been to me ever since I was born—never a wrong word from his lips—an' him always showin' me how to be a man——"

"Yes, yes, and you must be that still, Nicholas, and turn now to the King of kings."

So in their agony they look to the highest—"even you, O poor of the flock!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

JIM ANSCOMB, appearing in Harpsfield for the first time after his liberation, was soon made to feel a disappointed man. Villagers looked at him from doors and windows as one plague-stricken, and his welcome at the Coach and Horses lacked cordiality. The landlord aggressively pointed to the handleless face of the bar clock, on which was inscribed "No tick here," and the landlady refused him a bed. Sally Catmer, going for the supper beer, flung vehement epithets at him; Dave Lade said it seemed as how his time for hangin' wasn't full ripe yet; and Miss Treeves tried to bribe a man to beat him.

So Jim, after sundry shots of ribald wit, shook for ever the dust of his native village off his feet, and made Horsted his headquarters until such time as he should get a chance of turning a more or less honest penny out of these misfortunes. It was there one afternoon that he and Jacob Toms (the Thakeam club feast man) sat together at a window in a tavern opposite the county gaol. Only by paying for drinks could Toms induce Jim to enlarge on his prison experiences.

"Oh, I had a rattling time on the whole. Food pretty fair, but they don't give you enough of it. What I missed most was a smoke and the newspapers. I used to write for them myself, you know, and if I'd

kept it up I'd have showed them how to settle the affairs of Europe. Worst of me is I always get the itch to be off with the old love and on with the new."

"I'll be bound, now," said Jacob, "you'd be terrified to be hung for the wrong man."

"Not a bit of it, my lost tribe of Israel!" Jim lighted a cigarette in leisurely contempt of the insinuation. "I never for a minute let down my pecker. But they said I was funky, didn't they?"

"I've heard a rumour like it," Toms admitted.

"Ah well," said Jim, "I never could get people to realise the humour of my self-depreciation." He winked conceitedly at his companion.

"What licks me," observed Toms, "is how they shouldn't give a innocent gallant man his pipe."

"Ah-ha, you find things out over there. The chaplain is a selfish old humbug. He reeked with Manilla incense every time, but when I sniffed hints all round him he only went on nag-nagging about my infernal soul. Never mind; I had my crow over the corpulent sky-pilot the day I marched out with flying colours."

"Did you slang him, Jim?"

"Oh no—I paralysed him with the classics. He'd never listen to me when I tried them on him before; his alleged intellect couldn't rise above chapter and verse of his trade manual. But I gave him a fit when my order of release came. 'Ta-ta, old Scriptural fishing-tackle,' I said; 'give my love to friend Charon when you topple headfirst into his boat next week or the week after, and mind you don't catch any crabs on the Styx!'"

"To be sure," said Jacob Toms with twinkling eyes, "you are a mouthful of soap-suds, Jim. And how much have they rewarded you with for false imprisonment?"

"Not a blessed rotten farthing! Call this a free Christian country! Ah well," said Jim knowingly, "I'll make something out of it another way, see if I don't. A funny parson is in the gaol now with Zeekel, and I'm waiting for him to come out. But where's all that beer? My throat wants damping."

"It do," remarked Jacob. He fetched another tankard, and asked Jim if it was the Harpsfield parson that visited Draicot in prison.

"Oh no; this is a raw juvenile of a holy father, curate at one of the gates of heaven in Horsted. They say he's the son of a lord, so he must have tons of cash. He goes to see Zeekel two or three times every day, and the fat psalm-smiter that ladled sanctified skilly into me by the yard has to take a back seat now. He looks soft as butter to squeeze a quid or two out of." Jim puckered his brows as he looked across at the gaol. "I hear he's going to be with poor old Zeekel when he starts on his long kingdom come trip to-morrow morning."

"Only one more night for him," said Jacob, also gazing out. "It'll pass quick, I'm thinkin', with eternity to open its doors for him at eight o'clock sharp. They say he's never drooped a eyelid from fright all the while he's been in."

"No; they'll not see the white feather stuck on Zeekel."

"Don't you owe him no grudge, Jim?"

"Can't say I do. He let me out, you know, and he needn't have done it unless he liked. He might have bolted, or put a bullet in his noddle, and left me in the lurch."

"You'd jump for joy when the news come?"

"Oh no—I've postponed my Te Deum till I get the Government cheque for damage to my moral character. Upon my word I always thought till Zeekel confessed that the doctors had blundered and that Martin had shuffled himself off this mortal coil. Of course," said Jim with the genial indifference of the non-moral nature, "Zeekel did it for that woman. Blind fools the police and everybody else not to guess it! Plain to me now as the boozy nose on your face. He finished Martin to avenge her, and get her for himself—only their luck didn't run that way."

"Would she be a party to it, then?"

"Don't talk rot—of course she wasn't. She believed at first I did it. How she got wind of the truth I can't imagine. Zeekel may have let fall a word that roused her suspicion; or I shouldn't wonder if he grew desperate and put her to the test by owning up to it. Anyhow, she must have got to know and she must have made Zeekel give himself up, because he's not the sort to do a thing like that off his own bat just to oblige me."

"If 'tis so," said Toms, "then you should be grateful to her."

"Ha!" cried Jim; "that woman has made me see more green devils than all the women that ever lived!"

"But how," asked Toms, "didn't it come out at his trial if 'twas as you say?"

"Just what wouldn't, you dummy! Why, nobody in Harpsfield suspects anything of the kind to this day. She managed it somehow, all the same, and it's a mighty joke that she should have been the means of getting me out of the tightest fix I've ever been in." Still Jim felt no gratitude; he breathed, nevertheless, a philosophic sigh on the ash of his cigarette. "I used to think that the only time you could be sure of understanding women was when they loved you. Then I thought they could be trusted. That's another of my exploded illusions!"

"I'll not give it credit," said Jacob Toms, "that a woman could have affection for a man and yet send him to this disgraceful end."

"You don't know her! Why, she was the riddle of the universe to her own husband! She sent him raving mad——"

"No, no, I'll not believe it," said Toms. "Everybody says her good name was cleared at Draicot's trial."

"You don't know her!" Jim cried again. "That woman would dement an army if they'd let her begin her tricks on them. She tried her heavenly enchantment on me when I was in her house the night of the murder, but I wasn't taking any."

"What did she say to you, Jim?"

"Nothing at all—but there she was!"

Jacob may not have been quite so bewildered as he seemed. "Where was she, then, and how do you mean, 'there she was?'"

"How should I know?" Jim shouted in a temper. "She's nothing to me, and I'm not going to bother

myself about her. I'd rather take up with a wench on the tramp than with that woman! I went to her house to win a bet, and when I saw her I couldn't believe I had ever had anything to do with her. She's a living nightmare to me! I slept in a filthy doss-shanty last night, and woke up and thought she was in the room like a damned great fiery cherubim!"

"Might have been the drink, Jim."

"No, it wasn't; I hadn't had enough of it, worse luck! If she's the same Joan I had a lark with years ago, then I don't want—— Hullo, there's my clerical babe and suckling coming out. I'm off!"

Mr Selwyn turned up by a chalk pit on to the downs. He walked with less than his customary force. The air was very still, and full of the golden light of the setting sun. Every day since this man's condemnation the hills had called him out of the human deeps; every day he had lifted his eyes to their serene simplicity from the enigma of the human heart. He had just left Draicot in his cell, and the after-weakness of the purest and sublimest of all emotions, expressed with yearning intensity, was upon him. It seemed to the young priest that he could not go on much longer; this ordeal, though it had been graciously placed upon him, was burning him out; he felt that when the dread to-morrow was come and gone, he must withdraw himself from the world, from the gaze of his fellow-men, and shrink away into some grey cloistral retreat, with the Psalter and Thomas a Kempis. He stopped to look at a cluster of red poppies; gathered one, and went on, holding the long stem between his finger and thumb. He looked up

to the shining heights, and all nature became to him celestial symbolism.

He had ascended almost to the summit of the downland ridge, the huge pile of the gaol lying in shadow at his feet, when Jim overtook him. Mr Selwyn wheeled round abruptly, and his mood changed. He eyed Jim with frank repugnance.

"You are the man Anscomb?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Don't say that; you know better! What do you want?"

"I'm dead-beat, sir—stony-broke. I don't know where to turn for the next meal."

"Why don't you turn to work?"

This brutal remark crushed Jim's assurance. He resolved to play the part of the contrite heart. "I admit I've been a black sheep in my time, sir, but the dear chaplain down there showed me different, and now I want to make a fresh start with religion."

Now Mr Selwyn was an acute reader of character. A good man is not really deceived by a bad man, feign he ever so humbly, though he may be deceived by a bad man's good moments. The sacred sign was not on Jim's brow, and Mr Selwyn knew something of his history.

"Why don't you find employment?"

"I can't, sir; nobody will give me work because of this fearful face, done through me stopping a big dog worrying a child."

"Don't tell lies!" cried the curate. "Dogs don't attack children."

"Well, then, sir, if you'll not believe that——"

"I don't! I shall believe nothing you say unless I know it to be true."

"Oh, sir," said Jim, servile in voice and manner, "you are hard on a poor fellow who's suffered like I have without cause."

"Suffered!—without cause!—*you*? You have not suffered nearly enough!"

Jim at this was minded to let himself go in blasphemy, and forthwith depart. But dire necessity curbed his impulse. He was penniless, and would have to beg enough to get a bed to-night in that foul doss-house, for he had a particular abhorrence of the casual ward.

"I should like to try my luck in the colonies, sir, if some good Samaritan—yourself, for instance——"

Mr Selwyn jerked up his arms. "Please understand that a flattering tongue disagrees with me at all times, and especially in your case! You are not, I believe," he added, "a stranger to Mrs Potten?"

"No, sir."

"You knew her when she was a mere girl?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were her—her first sweetheart?"

"Yes, sir."

"Her awakening, pure love was given to you!—Don't speak!" cried Mr Selwyn, "or I may forget that I am a priest!——" He turned aside: his lips were firmly set; he drew a deep breath through his nostrils, and then bent upon Anscomb the scrutiny of his clear blue eyes. "I have been to Harpsfield——" He grew more excited; the natural man in him was at war with the decorum of the priestly office. 'I

paid Mrs Potten a visit last night——” Again he turned away.

“I was fond of that girl,” said Jim. “It’s a long while ago, and I’m surprised she should bear malice against me.”

“I can reassure you as to that! She bears you no malice. I did not insult her by once uttering your name in her presence. Your baseness changed the whole course of her life. But she has come out of it all—she will never go back—she has risen to the light that is in the faces of angels, and you are still grovelling in the mire!”

Again Anscomb’s mouth was loaded with profanity, and again he suppressed it. A broken man, he hoped against hope that the crazy parson was only administering rebuke before helping him.

“Poor Martin was the best friend I ever had, and his death gave me an awful shock, sir.”

“There are worse things than murder!” the priest said. “There are moral crimes—crimes which the laws of men do not touch—more infamous than any deed of violence! You are guilty of the meanest, most cowardly, most ruinous crime which can be committed against a fellow-creature. You are the betrayer of innocence! God made a pure and beautiful flower, and you defiled it! And you are guilty to this day, for you have not repented. You have made no expiation. You have boasted of your infamy in a public-house and made a paltry wager upon it. You are lower and more depraved than the beasts that perish!”

Jim cowered under the lash: it struck into

momentary life the smouldering spark of good in him. "I've always been sorry for what I did, sir——"

"Again you lie! Far from being sorry you aggravated your offence by daring to intrude your presence upon the woman you had so foully wronged. And still you go unrepentant and unpunished! She had to bear the consequences of your wickedness, as well as her own—the life-long consequences! I implore you," Mr Selwyn said, his voice changing to entreaty, "to endeavour to realise where and how you stand to-day. You are in the gutter, sinking lower and lower, and every decent man despises you."

"Yes, sir," Jim whined.

"Do you feel *no* remorse? Martin Potten's death—his wife's living martyrdom—Draicot's condemnation—all these are in the natural and spiritual development of your sin. I have been thinking much of this, and the Divine hand is to be traced in it."

"If you'd do something for me, sir, I'd be only too pleased to turn over a new leaf."

"I shall do nothing for you! You are now eating the husks on which the swine feed, and it is high time you said, 'I will arise and go to my Father.' But you plead with me in vain for material aid. Indeed I regret that it would be unseemly to me to inflict upon you personal chastisement."

"But, sir——"

"Go, go! And I hope that so long as you harden your heart your path in life may be strewn thick with thorns, and that all good people may see and loathe your moral leprosy!"

He abruptly strode away ; and Anscomb descended to the town, cursing as he went.

The young priest was still on the hills when night began to fall. Again and again he stopped to look down at the prison, and thought of it as of some ugly black blotch on the face of humanity. He watched the stars come out. And gazing upward, with clasped hands, he cried with a loud voice : " Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died ! "

CHAPTER XXXVII

IT was nearing seven o'clock, a shining morning in Harpsfield, and Nicholas Draicot and Roger Coo were crossing the park by way of the Shaws Barn. Neither had been home all night : they had slept in the potting-shed at the gardens ; Nicholas on a bare bench, Roger on the floor, his head pillowed on leaf mould. They washed in a tank of rain-water, using no soap, having no towel. Their faces had a dull steely shine in the early light here under the trees by the sheepfold. There were sheep about, and an old shepherd rested on his staff looking at Nicholas. He had known the boy's father ; knew that his brother was to die on the scaffold within the walls of Horsted gaol at eight o'clock this morning ; and he pitied the lad, yet had no audible greeting for him, nor made any sign of sympathy. The sun was rising on a great inarticulation in the village of shame.

The boys, avoiding the lodge gates, lest someone should be there, got through a hedge into a meadow.

" I wonder," said Roger, " if they'll be gatherin' outside yet to watch for the black flag."

But Nicholas did not reply. His eyes were swollen, but if he had been crying it must have been in his sleep, and Roger did not hear. They passed through a stile, and went slowly up a hilly path towards the village. Roger's hands hung feebler than ever by his

sides this morning, and he sniffed as though he had a cold in his head.

"I do believe, Nick, I was drunk last night."

But Nicholas, his eyes downcast, dragged himself in silence up the path. Then he stopped, Roger halting too. "If she's su'prised to see us, I'll say we thought mebbe she'd be feelin' lonely all by her own self."

"If you like," said Roger, "I'll say I wanted ycu to come."

"No," said Nicholas, and went on again.

The red blinds of the rectory were drawn down ; in the distance they appeared to be a brighter part of the autumn foliage. A man, wearing wire eye-guards, was breaking stones by the high-road. The rooks were cawing in the rosy light over the park.

They came to another stile, and here rested, seated back to back on the footboard.

"I'd not like to be a stone-breaker," said Roger.

But Nicholas sat very still. The sun was recalling the dew from the grass at his feet ; a bee ransacked the foxglove at which he seemed to be gazing ; there was a thrill of music in the sunny air—the chiming of the clock over the Squire's stables.

"My, I've never heard it as far before," said Roger.

"What would it be?" Nicholas asked.

"Must be quarter past seven."

"I never lissened to seven," said Nicholas.

"I did, Nick, an' thought you as well. I wonder if he's finished his breakfast yet. They say you can have anything you want for the last time."

Nicholas gulped down something that had stuck in his throat. "Mrs Potten'll be up by now," he said.

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"If she don't expect us——" said Roger.

"She'll let us in," murmured Zeekel's brother.

They went on, drawing nearer to the village. To both it appeared strange that no one should be about, not even at the Coach and Horses. They passed along Dripping-pan lane, and stopped at the corner of Miss Treeves' house. Roger, looking toward the church, said he wished Zeekel was to be buried there; Nicholas was looking toward the almshouse.

"Can you hear anything, Nick?"

"No."

"Everybody in their houses," said Roger, "shut up as if it was dead of night. My, I've got that queer sinkin' down of my heart again."

They moved a little way further. A tortoise-shell cat leapt from Miss Treeves' garden on to the low rubble wall. Nicholas stroked it; Roger said it couldn't catch sparrows like poor Martin with a lantern.

"I don't believe Mrs Potten's up, Nick. No smoke from her chimly."

Nicholas leaned over the wall and peered at the cottage windows. "All the blinds down," he said.

"Always they're kep' down when there's a funeral," said Roger. "Sally does the same."

"So'll Effie," said Nicholas. "She'll be cross, me not bein' home."

"Sally never is for me. It saves makin' the bed fresh, she says."

"I'm goin' in," said Nicholas.

Roger followed him down the pathway of uneven flagstones. Both went very quietly, as if afraid of

waking someone asleep. The dew was still on the flowers in Miss Treeves' window-sill, for the sun had not yet risen high enough to reach them.

Nicholas stood still outside Joan's door; Roger, behind him, whispered, "I don't hear a cheep, Nick Do you?"

Nicholas sighed. Roger did not notice it; Nick's sighing had been so common of late.

"She might be at her prayers. . . . Don't knock."

"I must," said Nicholas; "I want to be with her when it happens at eight——" He just touched the door with the tips of his fingers. They waited; it was not opened.

"Do it louder, then," said Roger. "She might be in a trance, like Sally says she saw her in after the Rector said the King'd not pardon him."

But Nicholas did not knock again; he softly turned the handle, and pushed the door open a few inches. He hesitated, and Roger whispered to him to go in first; but he said, "If she's gone to Horsted——"

"No, Nicholas, I am here."

It was Joan's voice, a wonderful voice in the boys' ears at this moment of their awe as in the presence of sacred powers. Joan appeared at the door, and there was a wonderful look in her face too. They had not come thinking so to see her. It was as though she smiled; and yet the sight of her filled them with a deeper reverence.

"You'll be surprised, Mrs Potten——"

"Oh, no, Nicholas," she said when speech failed him. "Please come in. And you, Roger—you will come in too, won't you?"

They entered, and she shut the door. The blind being down, the room was in partial darkness. The fire was in readiness for lighting. A white cloth was on the table, a cup of water, and a prayer-book. Nicholas thought of the holy table in church on Communion Sunday.

"I wanted," he said, "to be where you was, Mrs Potten—when it was done to Zeekel——"

"I am glad," she answered, "you have come."

"You might be feelin' lonely for company," Roger said.

"Thank you," she replied.

They marvelled at her quietness. She pointed to chairs, and asked them to sit down. They sat, and looked at the clock on the mantel-shelf. It was twenty minutes to eight.

"I've lost my concertina, Mrs Potten."

"I'm sorry for that, Roger. I hope you will find it again."

"I do miss it, Mrs Potten. So would poor Martin if he was alive. My, he was fond of a solemn tune, an' I've seen his eyes that bright when the organ struck up with Rock of Ages cleff for me."

"Yes, yes, I have been thinking of that too! . . . You both," said Joan, "seem so tired. Should you not have stayed with your sister, Nicholas?"

"I've not been home, Mrs Potten."

The ticking of the clock was like a living voice.

"There'll be a - many people now," said Roger, "outside the gaol to see it——"

The door opened, and Miss Treeves came in. She looked very ill; her hair was quite out of curl; she

was wearing her father's slippers. As she kissed Joan, "Did you send for his brother?" she asked in a low tone.

"No; he came of his own accord."

"Our arrangement," said Miss Treeves, "to stop by ourselves till—Oh, I couldn't keep my promise!"

"You must try to be calm, Janet."

"Joan, Joan!——"

The women clung to each other.

"Where is your sister, Nicholas?" the grief-stricken dressmaker inquired.

"She'll be home, Miss Treeves, I s'pose."

Again Janet held Joan to her breast.

"I feel like a mother and sister to you, and as if I had no mother or sister of my own, and no one else in the world to care for me. Did you sleep, Joan?"

"I don't think I had much sleep, Janet."

"Oh—have you not been in bed?"

"I didn't undress. I found several things to do, and I lay down for a while at dawn."

"I couldn't even do that! I've been wandering about the house all night. Did you hear me?"

"Yes, dear."

"Mother said I would be disturbing you! I'm so selfish, Joan, but what—what could I do? At sunrise I went in and looked at mother; she was lying in bed so peacefully, but her eyes were wide open, and she said she had never shut them. Then I went outside and stood by your door listening——"

"Yes, I heard you, Janet. You might have come in; the door was not locked."

"Ah, and I was craving to see you! Yet I knew

I should be worse if I did. So I walked all round the pond, and the swan came out of the water and stood at my feet—Oh, just as though it *knew*—and then I went back to the house, and took it some bread. You remember that beautiful day of the trial?—Oh, the village was just like that—so beautiful and so terrible! I've been soaking my poor head with vinegar; I feel as if I could just roll myself up and sink away for ever. And look at my flat, ugly hair. No more curls for me, Joan!"

"They'll come again," the sadder, quieter woman said. "Are your father and mother up yet?" she added.

"No—I won't let them. I've just made them a cup of tea, and put a little extra cream in it—some of that Mr Burward sends for mother's weak heart—and I ordered them to keep where they are, and not think of anything." Miss Treeves pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. "Mother says she's praying for him——"

"That is all we can do now," said Joan.

Nicholas and Roger had risen. Miss Treeves kept glancing at Nicholas. "I'm frightened to speak to him," she said in an undertone to Joan. "Won't you sit down, Nicholas? Oh, I'm so ashamed I can't do anything to comfort you!——" She went to the door. "I'll go back to father and mother."

The moment after Miss Treeves had hurried out, uttering an hysterical sob, the doorway was again darkened, and Nicholas said to Roger, "It's Effie."

Miss Draicot entered with apparent composure. Her

movements were as leisurely as usual ; a careworn stupor was upon her ; she seated herself on the first chair she came to, without noticing anyone. Then she drew her chair close to the table, and drank a little water from the cup. She sighed heavily, and folded her hands on her lap. She was wearing her best black satin gown, but thick masses of crape were in the place of the white lace.

She looked at the clock. "The light's bad, but I make it eleven and a half minutes to." No one spoke ; Effie had aged since these troubles began. "So you're here, Nicholas," she said, as though only now seeing him, yet with no accent of surprise.

"Yes, Effie ; me an' Roger wanted to keep Mrs Potten company."

"An' forgot your own sister. Not that I grudge you him, my dear. That house," said Effie, "with nobody in it but myself . . . where he was born and bred all his life till I turned him away. I've got back his trunk, what I put out in the garden that mornin', an' it's like his coffin now, yet I'll never have the heart to make firewood of it." Her heavy gaze rested on the prayer-book. "I've been at it myself for hours, but it don't do me no good. I know what folks say, but I can't bring myself to it I'm to blame for turnin' him out. Us Draicots have always been on the side of fairness, and if it's proved I was wrong, then I'll own to it." She composed the folds of her dress. "Where have you slept the last night, Nicholas?"

"In the pottin'-shed, Effie."

"We're not short of beddin' yet, us Draicots."

What for didn't you come home, after I'd cooked a nice supper for you?"

"I forgot, Effie."

Joan brought a chair from the other room, and sat beside Effie. The little clock on the mantel-shelf went on telling its tale. It was seven minutes to eight.

"That cradle we was all rocked in, I drewed it from under your bed, Nicholas. First me, then him, then you. All three of us rocked in it, and now him come to this."

They sat in silence. The minutes passed—the last minutes.

"I donno if anybody," said Effie, "would like to read the burial service." She took the prayer-book on her lap. "He's my brother, an' I'll not disown him. No, I'll not deny but what he's my brother." She put on her spectacles, and found the place. "I can't see this small print easy. *Thou turnest man to destruction: again Thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men.* It's in the Psalms of David," said Effie.

It was four minutes to the hour.

"Miss Draicot," said Joan, "shall we kneel?"

"It's customary," said Effie, "to stand up round a open grave, but with us kneelin' it might be more acceptable to Them above, waitin' for him."

Joan fell on her knees, and they all followed her example, kneeling round the table. Nicholas was close to Joan.

"I'll have to get stronger specs after this," said Effie. "*I know that my Redeemer liveth.* Mebbe

you'd like to read, Mrs Potten ; your sight's younger than mine."

Joan took the book.

"Only two minutes now," Nicholas moaned. "O Mrs Potten, if I had a taste of that water——"

She held the cup to his lips. She put her arm round him. The boy's head sank on the table, his hands clasped on his knees.

"Nicholas, Nicholas!——" But Joan's cry of terror was over on the instant. And she calmly read : "*Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts. Shut not Thy merciful ear to our prayer ; but spare us ! . . .*"

The clock struck eight. All heads but Joan's were bowed.

"Spare him, O Lord most holy ! Spare him, O Lord most mighty ! O holy and merciful Saviour, spare him, spare him ! . . ."

"My brother he was," said Effie, "an' I'll not deny him."

"He confessed !" Nicholas cried. "It might have been Jim on the gallows. But Zeekel confessed !"

Joan pressed her lips on the boy's brow.

"My brother," she whispered.

She rose, drew up the blind, and gazed out upon the morning. And there was a great hope in her soul, a great calm in her eyes.

THE END

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